Our Young Aeroplane Scouts

IN THE BALKANS

By Horace Porter

4/00

Harry A. Smith.

THE HOSTILE CRAFT COLLAPSED AND "CRASHED."

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Our Young Aeroplane Scouts In The Balkans

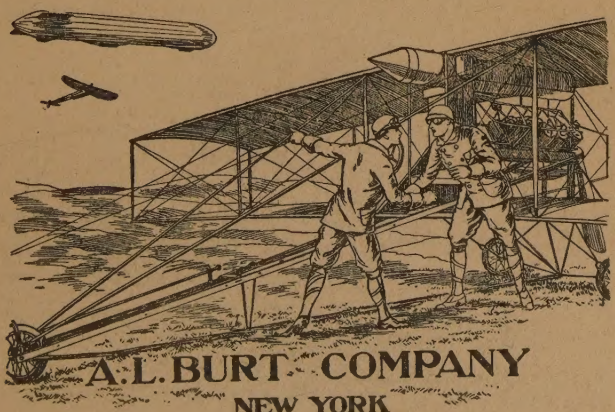
OR

Wearing the Red Badge of Courage among the Warring Legions

By HORACE PORTER

AUTHOR OF

"Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in France and Belgium"
"Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in Germany
"Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in Russia"
"Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in Turkey"
"Our Young Aeroplane Scouts at Verdun"
"Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in England"
"Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in Italy"



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OUR YOUNG AEROPLANE SCOUTS IN THE BALKANS

OUR YOUNG AEROPLANE SCOUTS IN THE BALKANS

CHAPTER I

AT THE IRON GATES OF THE DANUBE

A BIG warplane had settled on the level of a ridge, part of a magnificent winter picture of gently sloping hills, bountifully wooded and grading down to a mighty river, which at present floodtime raged over a two-mile bed of dangerous boulders. These submerged rocks, just beneath the surface, were marked by boiling, churning waves—so called the Iron Gates, the last great defile of the Danube river in its course to the Black Sea, and the first point at which the Austrians launched offensive against their new enemies, the Roumanians.

The two aviators, just leaving the armored flying machine after its drop into this scene of sylvan grandeur, were as trim and well set-up a pair as ever participated in the perilous calling of aerial naviga-

tion, and identified with the most daring and efficient of their profession serving aloft for warring nations engaged in the most stupendous and bloody conflict of all time.

Our Young Aeroplane Scouts, so known from sea to sea in the old world fighting zones, and in lands of snow and lands of sun—Billy Barry, Bangor, Maine, U.S.A., and his flying twin, Henri Trouville, equally at home under the Tricolor or Old Glory.

For five hours the boys had been continuously driving in the upper reaches, and this halt near the converging boundary lines of Hungary, Servia, and Roumania, was not only for sorely needed rest, but also of other purpose, in the military application, of even more pressing import.

At the head of the rapids is the once strongly fortified island of Ada Kaleh, now a Hungarian possession, but still occupied by a picturesque colony of Turks, and opposite this island, at the mouth of the little Bachma river, stands the Roumanian customs town of Verciorova.

It may be readily surmised that the flying twins were not contemplating a visit to the red fez community, but if by any hook or crook they could evade inpouring enemy troops, get into the other mentioned place for even a half hour, and out again, a long feather would be added to their caps.

In loyal holding, considerable coin of the realm was awaiting transfer from Verciorova to safer treasury elsewhere in Roumania, if "safer" was now the good word in a kingdom cracking in the grip of Teuton pincers—and one thing sure, Roumania registered packages were not freely moving on the Budapest-Bucharest railway at this writing!

What had possessed the boys to volunteer for this hazardous mission is not of record, and probably could not be otherwise explained by themselves than simply the temptation of a venture in which they would be their "own bosses" for the time being, along with the appeal of doing something to vary the daily service of sailing over and about the ever growing number of battlefields.

"The three hundred millionaires in Craiova will have to look out for their own," remarked Billy, shying a stone into the torrent at which he was gazing, "but, if you and I, sonny, can get away with the cash the post-master had hidden on the other side of this creek, it's something saved, anyhow."

Only a day or two previous the lads had a downlook on the peace-time prosperous city of Craiova, the rich population of which had fled before the amazingly rapid advance of the Germans.

Henri was still laughing over his chum's allusion to the "post-master," when all of a sudden the humor died within him, and all life merged into

hasty step and a strong pull on Billy's wrist in guidance toward the warplane.

"Where's the fire, Buddy?" The Bangor boy had not seen or heard anything to cause alarm, but his query in reference to the hurry movement on the part of the other twin was tempered by low pitch, as a rule of caution.

It so happened that while Billy was chiefly interesting himself in watching the turbulent tide, his companion had been casting longing looks at the splendid forest growth surmounting a hill less than a quarter mile distant, and which the lad believed was part of the game paradise described in a huntsman's tale he had heard at a campfire after the first battle at Cernavoda bridge. Henri, perhaps, was dreaming of what he would do with that repeating rifle, slung to his perch in the warplane, if given a day among the deer, wild boar, bear and other specimens of fur and feather reputed to exist in such abundance along these river banks.

A dream or not, young Trouville had an abrupt awakening, and what occasioned his quick tackle of the unsuspecting Billy Barry was the sight, just rising above the tree-tops, of as big a bird, maybe, as ever produced by the age of mastodons, and stonily preserved in modern museums—a monstrous, winged thing, which, in turning to clearer view, took on the shape of a whale!

As a salt water sailor for safety's sake would

choose a deep sea storm every time in preference to an earthquake, so the aviator instinct in Henri prompted immediate desire to get into a flying machine as the best method of dodging any threat of apparently overwhelming proportion.

The startling creature, however, did not then take a slant indicating disposition to crush and then pick the bones of the young scouts, hustling to make a getaway. Indeed, the gigantic mechanical contrivance, for such, of course, it was, had now set a course directly away from the river bank where our boys were standing sentinel alongside the aeroplane, yet uncertain as to which way they should strike out.

When the war wonder of the air finally disappeared behind the high line of the distant mountain ranges to the north, Billy had an inspiration which crowded a vivid memory out of his mouth:

"That's the very thing, sonny, or its very match, which chased us into Wallachia last week!"

"Was going to say that myself," cried Henri; "only for being tongue-tied a minute ago I should have done so."

With their heart-beats again normal, the flying twins took to figuring once more on the ways and means to be employed in the daring enterprise before them in the customs town up the river.

On the Serbian side of the river is a canal hewn

from the solid rock, used by the steamers which ply the Danube from Budapest to the Black Sea, but the current therein is so swift that vessels can only rush through on the downward journey, and so enforces the use of the old river course in getting back. As the war conditions on this border then existed, our boys well knew that under no mast or by no funnel hereabouts, in either main waterway, could they look for an ally shipmate, and their directed plan was to work around to the channel of the little Bachna stream as the best night lead into Verciorova. The same instructions had been given to another pair of air scouts several days ago, but this couple, wary veterans though they were, had evidently missed connection.

Demonet, the aviation chief, by whom Billy and Henri had been recruited for the Balkan service, was not much in the notion at first of sending the youngsters of his flotilla to follow up an errand which had evidently put two old stagers out of the game. But the Bangor boy had strenuously argued that the actual trip out-going by airline was only 240 miles, that the destined point of visitation was in territory from which fighting had lately been shifted, and it would help a lot to get some of the "planted" cash into circulation where it belonged and was most needed.

"You can't take a chance, chief, with the ground courier just now, and the railroad is nix," summed

up Billy—"and think of the grand-stand play you'll make when you hand over the coin to the city treasurer."

"The royal exchequer, you mean, my lad," gently admonished the head of the flying squadron, with a royal twinkle in his eye.

"Got him smiling, Buddy," were Henri's prompting words to his pal. "It's a go now, sure."

That it was a "go" is a fact already in evidence, insofar as the start and first landing are concerned.

The operations of the Teutonic confederates on the Wallachian plain had been carried out with such rapidity that with the Roumanian rout enormous booty fell into the hands of the invaders, the Indian corn crop, in and out of store, immense stocks in sheds, railroad stations and mills and aboard tugboats; petroleum-filled tank cars; great quantities of leather, meats, and salt. The authorities in Bucharest had learned from a refugee of the treasure in hard money hastily and successfully concealed by its faithful custodian just before the enemy hordes swept across the international boundary line. All other avenues of access now blocked by intervening, living walls, in the flying contingent was vested all hope of prompt effort to rescue the golden trove.

One try, as before stated, had already gone amiss. Leclaire and Pentonville, high riders of renown,

sharp as briars at reconnoitering and very Tartars in close fighting, were counted down and out through unexplained absence, and here now at the Iron Gates of the Danube were the youthful successors of the veteran airmen in earnest confab as to how to make good with the inherited venture.

"We have it here in black and white," remarked Billy, producing the memorandum which the aviation chief had handed him when the boys were boarding the warplane for flight from Bucharest. "The hiding place of the stuff, I note, is 'Vibart's warehouse, at the east side of the town, the largest building on the river front there and with wide platform partly supported by stone piers rising from the water's edge. In space between top of center pier of the seven and planking above are the money bags.'"

"Plain enough," commented Henri, after the reading by his chum of the penciled outline of action. "That the shack belongs to 'Vibart' doesn't help much, my noble duke, but the big pile with the piers and an east front on the river can't get away from my memory. Put a match to the paper, Buddy; don't want it on us in case of accident."

"Buddy" put the memorandum into the smoke column, as suggested, and as the next move precedent to the main adventure the young scouts sought a convenient point of cover for the warplane, in warrant against any possibility of observation by

a wrong pair of eyes, aground or aloft, while the lads were going on foot, Indian fashion, over the two or three miles of up and down country then between them and a close view of the boundary town where the final trick of the inward journey was to be later turned. At the edge of a strip of woodland fringing the south line of the ridge the aviators located an entering wedge in the shape of a one-time logging road, which penetrated a dense new growth for quite a distance, making easy rolling for the flying machine and providing an evergreen canopy within fifty yards of the opening that could not be bettered as a hiding place for the aerial craft.

"Now, pard," said Billy, beaming with satisfaction at the effective disposal of the big warplane, "it's a hoof over the hills for us, and among the trees as far as they go."

That the boys had up to the minute proceeded with impunity along the dissolving end of the Iron Gates torrent is explained by the fact that they were on "tramped over" ground, the pursued troops falling back eastward to massing point and last stand in front of the sorely besieged capital city of the Roumanians, and the invading army of the German general, von Falkenhayn, as pursuers, hanging on like grim death in the wake of the retiring battalions.

As evidence of the haste and confusion attendant upon this line of retreat, several times during

their stealthy progress through forest depths, Billy and Henri stumbled upon the hiding places of cannon, and in gorges more than once the young scouts looked down upon shattered artillery pieces hurled from heights by Roumanians hard driven before the sudden and overwhelming onslaught of German, Austro-Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Turkish forces.

Of much more concern, however, to the boys, as a menace to their own safety and, as well, to the success of their mission, was the result of an over-shoulder look by Henri when the flying twins were about to ascend the last of the wooded slopes between the big and little rivers, and the summit that would afford an outlook by which the lads expected to accurately locate the particular point they sought and decide upon the easiest way to get at it.

Billy, slightly in advance of his chum, felt a clutch at his elbow and then, the whispered words of warning that stood the Bangor boy in his tracks like a graven image.

"Somebody stalking us!"

Hardly more than a shadow flitting across a glade rearward some fifty feet, and through which the aviators had passed a minute or so before, but young Trouville was of vision too keen, even though the glimpse was of snapshot variety, to credit the hurrying shape with being wholly a creature of high-keyed imagination.

From a soldier sentry a challenge might have been immediately expected, yet no sound was heard in the woodland save the sough of the wind in the tall timber. The boys posed as still as statues in tensely listening attitudes, and, khaki-clad, seeming part of the winter trimming of the forest.

Directly, with no further manifestation of other living presence than their own in the immediate surroundings, the young scouts, without relaxing due measure of caution, resumed their climb of the slope, doing some flitting themselves from tree to tree, and exercising the high foot lift when crossing the wider open spaces where the brown carpet of leaves lay heaviest, in order that the least of rustling should ensue and so prevent a trailing by sound.

During a pause and leaning against the trunk of a great oak, Billy ventured to suggest to the other twin that perhaps it was a four-legged something that Henri probably had seen in his recent look backwards.

"Not on your life," stoutly but not loudly maintained young Trouville; "it was a man, and extra man size, topped by a fur tile like a Cossack's. Gun on his shoulder, too."

"Glad the gentleman, if he belongs around here, did not mistake us for deer, or," added the Bangor boy, "visitors from Berlin or Vienna."

"Don't rejoice beyond the limit," quietly advised

Henri; "we're not yet out of the woods."

In a few minutes, however, the airmen reached the top of the hill, which contained about the last close cover on the east side of the river valley and a half mile from the international boundary and Vercierova.

But "not yet out of the woods." Young Trouville had honor as a prophet.

Quite brief the free breathing spell of the young scouts on the hill-crest. It was Billy this time who turned for a glance at the back-track, and now convinced that the trailer under a fur cap was not a myth. As plain as day, he saw the upper half of the man above a bush cluster near the very oak where the aviators had stopped to converse—and then again the vanishing act.

The Bangor boy had an exclamation at his tongue's end for the benefit of his flying partner, but the latter was working another live lead of his own, at the front on this occasion, and on all fours just within growth that bordered a clearing of considerable size and of oval outline. Billy deemed the posture of his companion well worthy of imitation, instantly surmising that there must be a good reason for Henri's performance. The last mentioned twin took a second off the watching job that held him flat and at rapt attention and passed back to his now also recumbent pal a finger signal that invited quick crawling forward.

Young Barry did not spare hands or knees in getting to the fore, and without need to question when he achieved the goal. On the other side of the screen was glue for the eyes that permitted no wavering—an astonishing exhibit, indeed!

CHAPTER II

OF ADVENTURE IN THE WOODS

About fifty yards distant in the clearing the boys, from their place of concealment, had unobstructed view of what appeared to be a gigantic fish with double fins, which might have, by stretch of comparison at first sight, just flopped out of the water and lying stranded on its belly in the sand. The leviathan had four big eyes on each side.

By continued inspection, though, the young scouts realized that this curious contrivance at rest was the same mechanical scaremark they had twice before seen in operation high above the ground, and which Billy had labeled a "sawed-off Zeppelin."

"There's your winged whale, sonny," now whispered the Bangor lad in the near ear of his chum; "and here's the nest out of which it flew a little while ago."

Henri at the moment was trying to locate the sound of another voice than his pal's, which seemed to emanate from an interlacing mass of vines near

the far end of the forest-enclosed oval, and used the back of a hand to shut off further distracting remarks by Billy.

The latter joined the listening class forthwith, for he, too, had in hearing now the deep tones of the speaker somewhere in front, speedily supplemented by other contributing tongues, and then the showing in the open of the conversation makers in bodily presence—four in number, and a husky lot to look upon. The young scouts knew instantly by the service make-up that the quartette represented the aviation branch, and beyond doubt operators, in turn, of the flying whale.

At the distance Billy and Henri could not make head nor tail of what the German airmen were discussing, and quite tempting to both of the youngsters was the mental proposition to get nearer, if discovery could be avoided, not only to the talkers, but also to the odd-looking aircraft, which certainly was an object of great interest to the lads.

Young Trouville started the serpentine reconnoiter by backing a little deeper in the brush, and after the manner of the crawling species, sinuously proceeded in the growth alongside and half circling the bare spot where the Teuton aviators had established rendezvous. Billy was a close second in the creeping movement, but the first to produce a bit of ill-luck which very nearly brought the enterprise to disastrous finish. A fallen, dry twig under the boy's

knee snapped like a small torpedo when the twins had rounded within thirty feet of the group inside the oval.

A guttural exclamation from one of the aroused Germans indicated that the Bangor boy had made a "hit," but for which the unwitting offender would have gladly waived applause. One after another the young aviators, flat on the ground, saw four pairs of stocky legs making cautious tread through the underbrush, and an inducement for desperate resolve on the part of the scarce breathing, hidden youths to use the revolvers they carried as a crippling battery in the event that the searchers approached too near the drift of leaves into which the youngsters had burrowed.

Happily, however, for Billy and Henri, suspicion waned in the minds of the stalwart soldier-airmen before they had trampled upon the hiding place of the flying twins, and so relieving the lads of the last resort expedient of shoot and run.

The apparent leader of the investigating party, stopping at a point so close to the concealing leaf mound that the young scouts could see the white in his eyes, restored the big pistol he was gripping to its holster, and used both arms in uplift accompaniment to a prodigious yawn.

"It is not so much as a cow," he declared to the comrade at his elbow.

That is the way the boys translated the declara-

tion, and to so interpret it was a mighty pleasing test of linguistic ability, particularly when emphasized by action of withdrawal.

It was the intent of the boys, now that imminent danger of capture or a free-for-all fight with all odds the wrong way had passed, to lie close until nightfall, already casting shadows before, in order that opportunity might better serve unobserved descent into the river valley, for once out of cover an encounter with some prowling vidette or belated squad could be counted an ever present possibility. By the promise of a beneficent almanac record, a late moon would help in the critical hour of picking a way to "Vibart's" among the unknown river precincts of Verciorova.

The capacious knapsacks strapped between the shoulders of the young aviators, containing now their visible supply of traveling rations, the youthful marauders expected to load to capacity limit with the yellow discs, supposedly reposing in hastily contrived cache before described, and within a comparatively short distance of the elevation where Billy and Henri were awaiting the favor of friendly darkness.

In the meantime the gray-garbed fellows in the clearing, showing no disposition to vacate the premises by the air route, had replenished a campfire in front oī a net-work of vines, which evidently surrounded the improvised quarters of these high driv-

ers stationed at the loftiest lookout point hereabouts above the valley and flat country beyond.

The savory odors from frying pan and broiling stick then assailed the nostrils of the boys in their growing chilly wallow outside the circle, and reflecting disdain upon the cold "snack" which would be their portion for the relief of hunger.

With all the ownerless beef on the hoof running loose in Wallachia the conquering soldiers were living like lords of the old creation, which was small comfort to our heroes, vouchsafed only the smell of the royal feast.

"Never mind, sonny," murmured Billy to his chum, ruefully munching a bit of soggy corn bread, "when we get back to Bucharest with the swag I'll stake you to the best feed the Hotel du Boulevard can produce."

Henri grinned his appreciation of the prospect, but all the time thinking that the "steak" most preferable would be a cut from the red meat sizzling at the moment over the nearby campfire.

"If you think you can move less like a Fourth of July procession," he presently suggested, "I've a mind to get a little closer to that vine-clad canopy over there and hear some of the latest war news. Lots could have happened since we've been out on the wing."

No mishap marred the creeping venture this time, but just the same the young scouts got a jolt through

the ears which momentarily reduced the spirit of adventure to a thin black line.

The lusty feeders at the campfire punctuated feats of swallowing with remarks to their liking, and the listeners picked from the talkfest one knockout fact which made meaningless to the lads all immediately ensuing words.

Bucharest had fallen!

What of Demonet, the big chief; Lascelles, Martigne, Logan, Cantrell and other shining lights of the famous aerial flotilla with headquarters in "the Paris of the East," a proud city finally gripped in alien mailed fist despite its eighteen fortifications of the first class and many redoubts and batteries?

In the first stunning flash of the dire information, obtained by stealth, the young scouts had that all gone feeling of nothing to which they could tie, no place in this strange land where they might anchor in return voyage, even if they ever succeeded in achieving free passage.

As to the special assignment that had hurried them from the capital—it was, at this contemplation, of the same consequence as a footless stocking without a leg.

The "sand" in Billy Barry's craw, however, had receded no lower than his collar button, and the never quit bumptiousness in his makeup soon again began to assert itself. It was black enough now, looking away from the fitful glow of the fire in the clear-

ing, to hide a white elephant, and the Bangor boy, renewing dogged determination to stick to the job to which his chum and himself were committed, no matter the aftermath, commenced the squirming process of separation from the German aviation camp. He heard the breathing of his flying partner close by, sufficient assurance that the other twin was also wriggling backwards, but, a moment later, had occasion to wonder how in the name of nature Henri could have doubled up so as to be heard on both sides of the retrograde path!

"S'that you, Buddy?" This sibilant query Billy turned his face to the left to propound.

"S'me," came the answer out of the brush, an arm's-length away.

"Then who in the dickens is my company on the right?" The puzzled writher confined this question to himself. He was not caring to start anything just then by investigation which might result in a rumpus that would bring the "big four" full tilt with revolvers and flashlights.

Jackal, hyena, bear, or cougar on a still hunt? Beyond a guess for Billy; he could not see the fingers of his own hand three inches in front of his eyes, and there was no scent afloat that a human nose might detect and judge.

Realizing that there must surely be a showdown of some sort ere long, and no further occasion to "worm the path," young Barry piped a low whistle

to the other twin, and together they prepared to tackle, as best they could, whatever might leap at them from the sable recesses of the forest. With every nerve taut, the boys dropped ready fingers to grip the shooting irons holstered at their hips, for loath as they were to stir up the camp in the clearing, the alternative, apparently, provided little choice of action.

"Hist!"

Surely not of beast production, this sound from the bush—and better proved when a match, scraped alight, showed a tiny and guarded illumination within cupped hand-palms above the shadowy figure of a man suddenly rising from the dense, short growth which Billy and Henri were expectantly facing.

Brief though the glimpse in the flicker of the lucifer, the boys were convinced that here again was the stalker who had trailed at their heels during the afternoon, the tall fellow with the Cossack headgear.

But the language quickly spoken, and softly modulated, by the stranger was not that of the Russ. In the Roumanian dialect, basically Italian, he asked:

"Are you in the service of the king?"

Henri construed aright, as he promptly replied: "We serve with the allies, signor, and so, if the king be Ferdinand of Roumania, our service is his."

The response evidently reached the understand-

ing of the questioner, for he felt for the hands of the youths in the darkness, and put a lot of pressure in the greeting.

"I am Antony Gregoire of Turnu Severin—eleven miles away, signors, to the southeast," explained the speaker, "one time shipbuilder until the Austrian monitors made wreck of it all. Many a good vessel owes its timbers to these woods."

"You're pretty well acquainted round here, then?" Billy essayed this query in the lingo of the peninsula.

"To me, it is an open book, this country," asserted Antony.

"Know a fellow named 'Vibart' who has a place on the Bachna?" was the Bangor boy's next interrogation.

"Ah, signor, and well; he, too, had much to do with ships. I know not where he may be this night, but the great warehouse that he built is not far from here."

"Here's our huckleberry," was Billy's jubilant aside remark to his chum.

Then to the Roumanian: "If you want to do your king a good turn, signor, show us the way to Vibart's."

"To the death I am with you, signors," solemnly stated the ex-shipbuilder. "I was not sure at first that you were friends, and not until I saw you retreat from yonder campfire was I convinced. Follow me."

Indian file the trio trod silently the woodland trail unerringly set by the guide, trending more and more to descending course, and directly no intervening treetops between uplook and the stars.

Cat-footing a devious route in the valley, the young aviators and their new found friend were suddenly given an illuminating bath that could not be credited to the pale moon which was striving to get high enough to be noticeable. Looking to the near south was presented the spectacle of a searchlight canopy over some otherwise unseen point. The blazing white beams shot from every angle, and the very heart of the valley was touched to effulgence by the great, broad bands of dazzling daylight.

Seemingly almost within a stone-throw the lads saw the line of buildings on the silvered tide of the winding river border of Verciorova, and then, of an instant, the spectacular brilliance faded and darkness again reigned.

"The big light from Orsova, which the enemy took not long ago. Prisoners have escaped, I think, signors." Gregoire could account in no other way for the vivid display at this hour, now that the defending troops had departed and no contest for possession of the valley or its immediate surroundings.

"Liable to catch us if there's a round-up," observed Billy, "and the quicker we operate and get out of here the better. Get me back in an aeroplane,

and strategy or no strategy, I'm going to have it hitched within three jumps of my next assignment."

"For a fellow that's traveled around with such head-pieces as are owned by Herr Roque and Ardelle, you talk like a goat, Buddy. If we had buzzed in here aboard a flying machine our hides would now be drying on the frame of that winged monster on top of the hill. Remember Leclaire and Pentonville, who never came back."

Henri's reference to Roque and Ardelle, respectively, the most eminent secret agents of Germany and France, will recall some famous clashes of wits between the two, and in connection with former adventures of Our Young Aeroplane Scouts.

Antony did not understand what his young companions were talking about, as they dropped anything like Italian from the argument, but the guide appreciated that whatever business the boys had in the old warehouse they had good reason to be at and done with it.

The guide was just about to advise haste in the premises when two hurrying shapes, approaching, entered a faint spread of moonlight in the open, and quite near the spot where the trio of first comers had halted in the shadow of the tall buildings.

Even in the half-light Billy recognized in the nearest runner a comrade of the Demonet squadron—the long missing Leclaire!

"Hey, old top," called the young scout, "we've been waiting for you."

"Billy Barry, or I'm a sinner," panted the astonished veteran, as the Bangor boy stepped forward into the moonlit space.

CHAPTER III

THE GETTING OF THE GOLD

"And from where in the starry toplights did you ducklets drop?" Pentonville had just recovered speech, after gasp of astonishment and foregoing results of carrying his 180 pounds at a merry clip over quite a stretch of country.

"Just came over to go bail for a couple of erring friends," jollied Henri. "We know where there's plenty of money to cover a bond."

"Oh, I see," broke in Leclaire; "you're supposed to be filling our shoes in the go for the gold. Honors up, my laddies. It will be easier carried. But who is the fifth of present company?" The speaking aviator had just noted, in the background, the tall figure of the fur-capped Roumanian.

"He's an ally out of a job," advised Billy; "and a trump card in a pinch, believe me. Meet some more willing workers for the king, signor," continued the young scout, shifting language in address to Antony.

The new friend promptly acknowledged the intro-

duction. The Bangor boy had struck the right chord in his announcement.

"Tell us now," urged young Trouville, with an appraising glance at the torn and mud bespattered uniforms of the sprinters, "what happened to you; where's your aeroplane; who stopped your clock in the first place, and from whom and where did you break away?"

Leclaire shrugged his shoulders, turned the palms of his hands outward in gesture of defense against the question fire, and then, laughing, told the inquiring youth that the story would keep without ice until the first leisure hour.

"There's something at hand now, my boy," added the veteran, "which will liven the waiting time, and, maybe, attach a tin can to us if we don't hurry of our own accord."

"Which one of these buildings is Vibart's?" Billy put the query to Gregoire.

The latter made no reply in words, but his action of starting immediately down the river bank was ample evidence that he understood what was wanted.

Equally silent, the three aviators duplicated the movement of the guide, and sufficient the wavering moonbeams to outline log and lumber piles and stumbling blocks of various kinds without the aid of the flashlights that Billy and Henri made ever a part of their field equipment. These handy sparklers, however, came into good play when, at last,

Antony abruptly halted at the wharf base of a loading incline, slanting from an elevated platform at the river front of a structure of night-magnified proportions which, in illusion, added twice to its height and length. The gloom here had no relief from moon-ray nor the few high-lights that before had shown an occasional glimmer from the town at the mouth of the little river and on the left bank of the mighty Danube.

"Vibart's," was the laconic announcement of the Roumanian, who as yet had no inkling of the purpose of this nocturnal visit to the deserted warehouse.

The Bangor boy flashed his pocket illuminator along the piers under the platform. As well as Henri and Billy himself, the other airmen knew what the boy had in mind, for between the four was divided knowledge of the secreted hoard.

"Tell the tall one to act as watchman on the outside," suggested Pentonville to Henri.

"Good idea," replied the lad, "but only for caution, for the man's true blue, as you'll find if there's a squeeze in getting out of these diggings."

Gregoire, it happened, proved the right color, and extra luster, too, in the thrilling experiences that followed.

Under the platform, behind the underpinnings of solid masonry, extending rearward twenty or more feet, Billy was repeating his count—"one, two,

three, four—best four in seven for the series, old top"—this last directed at Pentonville, who was peering at the stone-work over the younger scout's shoulder.

"Now, sonny," continued the figuring twin, turning to Henri, "as you're the lightweight of the bunch, we'll have to give you the leg up."

"We'll" meant the big fellows of the quartette, who not only gave young Trouville the "leg up" but also the support of broad shoulders until the lad could get finger and foothold at the top of the pier.

For as much as half a minute the climbing youngster disappeared from the range of the little spotlight upturned in Billy's hand. Then from above the sound of a sneeze and a voice with a slight choke in it telling the group below to "stand from under."

One by one, striking the hard-packed earth at the base of the pier, each impact producing a musical clink, small bags of buckskin began to fall, and not until a dozen or more had raised a heap at the feet of the watchers did the successful miner aloft, powdered with mortar dust, follow his rich find in scratching and scraping descent.

Resting a second or two in triumph in the arm-basket formed by the same stalwart comrades who had previously furnished the boost, Henri laughingly declared that he felt like a plaster of Paris cast.

"And you look the part," affirmed the other twin, flashlighting his white-coated pal from top to toe.

"Off with those food bags, laddies," briskly requested Pentonville, "and let's load the gilt. Leclaire and I came away from the guard-house, in light marching order, as you know, minus all else save what's next to our skins."

"Our friend outside has a game pouch that'll help some," suggested Henri.

"Give him the bid in," directed the big fellow, busily engaged in stuffing one of the knapsacks with the only great collateral value it had ever contained.

Young Trouville started out to extend invitation to the Roumanian to join the "bankers' " coterie, but made only a half-way job of it—the other half of the distance completed by the long-legged sentinel, who defied the darkness by coming full tilt under the platform cover.

"Soldiers in the valley—many of them—it was the big light, as I told you—only one way to escape —must take it quick—quick, I say!"

Henri got so much out of the jargon of the warning herald of trouble, faced about and made short work of the few strides that it took him to rejoin the trio behind the piers.

Antony was close behind when the boy, waving flashlight overhead, charged at the startled three who had just succeeded in stowing most of the treasure in the carrying receptacles.

"What's the row?" This demand for information from Leclaire.

"The whole garrison is after you, I guess," proclaimed the Trouville lad, "and 'hump' is the word."

Swinging the now weighty knapsacks over their shoulders, the big airmen were ready to "hump" in any fixed direction.

"Does the lanky man 'know the ropes' in this tomb?" asked Pentonville.

"Says he can follow the only way out that's open now," advised Henri.

"Tip him some of the heft still on the floor," said Leclaire, "and then we're off."

Billy hastily lifted and forced the remaining buckskin sacks into the game-bag carried by Gregoire, at the same time exchanging the luminous tube in his own right hand for the long rifle possessed by the guide.

"You'll need the glim in front," explained the boy, "and I'll take good care of the gun until you want it."

All of a sudden the planking supported by the piers and immediately overhead resounded with the downset of many boot-heels, and simultaneously a discordant medley of voices pervaded the night along the river bank, on the same level with the earthy base of the stone foundations of the warehouse.

"Trapped as sure as shooting!"

Pentonville's exclamation was accompanied by the act of reaching for a jagged piece of scrap-iron in a junk pile revealed by Henri's flashlight.

All this was passing much quicker than the telling, and the warrior flying artist preparing for anticipated fracas never had a bit of use for the rusty metal bar which he desperately grabbed.

The Roumanian was the fellow who loomed the largest in this pinch, and that he even better knew the business haunt of one Vibart than he modestly claimed in the first instance had remarkable demonstration in a precious minute.

By the time the searching soldiery with flaming torches penetrated the black depths of the underside of the platform, the grounded birds had flown therefrom in the wake of a crafty gander with a fur top-knot.

The disappearing flock, however, had many a tight squeeze in flight before the going permitted continuous progress at full length, up and down, and the real heavyweight of the party, Pentonville, time and again protested that he would suffocate if not soon free of "this blasted cellar."

When once more the fugitives whiffed fresh air it came through a heavy door which Antony cautiously opened quarter way for look-about purpose.

The blinking of lights here and there indicated that before the vision of the little company lay the sleeping town of Verciorova, and of what degree of immunity there from further pursuit by the baffled squads in the river valley no sure measure could be made.

Gregoire, perhaps, knew where the military guards had location in these environs, for the Roumanian had already impressed the aviators with the belief that their guide owned a cinch on a deal of useful knowledge relative to this particular vicinity.

Whatever plan the shrewd and well-posted individual, assuming leadership by right of superior acquaintance with the surroundings, had then under his fur thinking cap, he was a bit slow about imparting it to the others, and Leclaire, waxing impatient at inaction with near dawn in prospect, suggested a prod through Henri, the conceded interlocutor when it came to pattering the dialect of the country.

"Tell him, my boy, that we're treble value now, and no insurance return in case of accident. We'll have to 'plant' the ducats after all, I guess, but the further away the burying ground from this hot-box, the easier for later resurrection."

Antony, it developed, did not have to be spurred, for before the Trouville lad could think of a diplomatic form of address, the tall one clapped his hands in token of formed resolution, and said:

"The valley way is closed now, but the river—the big one—runs fast. We move again."

Billy understood the words of the Roumanian in regard to the proposed method of exit, and, remembering the turbulence of the flood in the Iron Gates as he last had viewed it, was inclined, at first, to believe that the royal treasury would be short quite

an amount if the gold-bearers attempted to make a night shoot of the rapids in a small boat.

But, as the boy's Uncle Jacob, up in the U. S. A. land where the spruce comes from, would have remarked, it was a case of "root, hog, or die." So the Bangor boy held his tongue, and the other twin was similarly reticent. As far as Leclaire and Pentonville were concerned, dull care never bothered them.

Saddled with a load of coin, of which he just learned the value from Henri, the full responsibility of dodging garrison patrol, somehow securing a boat and guiding it in darkness through dangerous waters, Antony was carrying as much weight as a trade camel at the gates of Jerusalem.

The man with the extra burden, however, wore it lightly, it looked, was foxy enough to achieve a detour of the town which attracted no unwelcome attention, and finally brought the nightfarers to coveted proximity with the down-sweeping current of the Danube.

Advising his companions to "lie low," the wily scout left them at a point where a collection of sand dunes afforded both protection from chance observation in the event that dawn should arrive before Gregoire returned, and a soft resting place for the four airmen, somewhat wearied by the strenuous activities to which they all had been subjected in the preceding two hours.

Antony evidently had luck for a running mate in

his foray, as it seemed, even to the chafing Leclaire, an incredibly short period of absence before the guide reappeared, dripping wet from the waist down, but mutely expressing triumph in the characteristic manner of clapping his hands.

Pointing the "fire-stick" loaned by Billy towards the river line, the Roumanian gave utterance to just one word—"Come!"

CHAPTER IV

A PERILOUS PASSAGE

THE scow which Gregoire had succeeded in extricating from the tangle of small craft further up the river looked like it could stand hard knocks, and, also, that the old square-ender had already received many a one.

"Looked" is used advisedly, for gray morning had mistily introduced itself while the little company were hurrying to make their last cast at getting away from a locality where enough of the enemy had remained "on the lid" to make it decidedly uncomfortable for anybody else without proper credentials who might be caught violating the edicts of martial law.

"There would be a pretty howdy-do among the gray-backs," laughingly remarked Billy Barry, "if they knew that the savings department of the First National Bank in Roumania was going down the river this morning."

This sally opened every face with a grin except the hard-set visage of the Roumanian, who did not understand, and who, in addition, was divesting him-

self of impeding weight, game-bag, revolver holsters, and cartridge belt and stowing them forward in the boat, where his station was to be as chief fending operator with a long pole.

With the craft under way for the perilous passage, everybody "sat tight" except the man in front, and it was really a remarkable exhibit of nerve and skill, the manner in which the boat was handled, submerged almost to the gunwales by an excess of carrying capacity, continually buffeted by the boiling, churning waves and scraped fore and aft by dangerous rocks concealed by the ever-racing flood.

The voyage, however, was as brief as it was hazardous—less than three miles—and in the calmer reaches below the wild water, the pilot was enabled to guide the boat inshore—along the wooded bluffs —and safely ground it within the friendly shelter of an offering cove.

Notwithstanding the penetrating chill of the early morning, great beads of perspiration flecked the face of the Roumanian, and there was a tremor in the sinewy hand that lifted the oppressing fur cap, that its wearer might be fanned by the frosty breath of the forest.

"In the canal," said Gregoire, indicating the Serbian side of the river, "it is smoother sailing down, but we would not have traveled alone—too much company there." The speaker was feeling the grim humor of his own last words, and actually

wore a smile, the first he had produced since meeting our boys.

The next move was the exercise of the combined strength of the party in pulling the square-nosed craft into the high and dry enfoldment of the bushes back of the inlet, and no sooner had the task been accomplished than the five workers had occasion to get under cover themselves.

Almost directly above the landing place at the edge of the woods a most familiar noise to the aviators superseded the sound of rushing water below, the buzzing of motors, and, at that, evidence of unusually powerful driving force in operation.

Henri had the initial view of the creating cause of the commotion in the upper air, and was not at all slow in exploiting his discovery:

"The flying fish!"

Pentonville got a glimpse then of the monster machine circling over the tree-tops, and the comment he made had rancor in it.

"That's the infernal thing that put us down," growled the big fellow, "and it will be a great day when I can even the score."

Leclaire, too, had a savage look in his eye when he glared upward at the big mechanical bird serving the enemy inspectors in their morning round of espionage.

The young scouts understood now what had brought their squadron comrades to grief in the

original attempt of the latter to reach Verciorova by the air route, and inwardly congratulated themselves that they had happened to see in advance the winged destroyer before getting into the same predicament as did their seniors.

As on previous occasion, the odd-shaped craft finally sailed toward the mountainous district north, and was lost to sight beyond the hills.

No news to Leclaire and Pentonville was the story of the fall of the capital city—they had heard the boast of conquest from their captors in Orsova, and, also, what Billy and Henri did not know, that the defending allies were then supposed to be backing toward Roumania's northern province of Moldavia.

In "council of war," the airmen were of one mind as to the futility of attempting now to do more with the crown money than to conceal it in these woods until a better day should insure its delivery.

As to present disposal of their further personal service, the discussion was still more vague in fixed purpose. Our boys had yet to assure themselves that their military biplane was in the place they had left it, and even so, it was doubtful if there was enough petrol in the tanks to drive the aeroplane anywheres near the added distance to the new formation of the native and aiding troops. Topping it all, the flying twins were strongly disinclined to embrace any getaway plan which did not include their aviation comrades.

"Perhaps there is something to our hands in this vicinity," suggested the Bangor boy, when the problem would not solve. "Our friend here" (referring to Antony) "must have some object in life, and is too much of a patriot to stay out of the ranks if he didn't have something else up his sleeve beside his arm. Sound him, Henri."

Gregoire, repossessed of his rifle and leaning on it, staff-like, had been a silent onlooker during the council of his companions, and young Trouville's address to him, by request, evidently disturbed deep meditation.

Comprehending, at length, the attitude of the others in regard to himself and his consequence as an adviser, the tall Roumanian broke reserve, and stated in substance, that his presence in these parts was by express command, but the nature of his duties he passed without detail, save significant reference to the necessity of service "not blared by trumpets."

"Sometimes," he asserted, "much is written in smoke columns that rise from heights to height again."

Billy turned a side glance at his pal. The boy recalled the blue and black vapor that had spiraled aloft from a near hill-top when they sailed into the landscape featuring the frenzy-churned waters of the Iron Gates.

Here, too, was a reminder that somewhere here-

abouts lay the cover containing the warplane in which the aforesaid journey was made and finished.

"My friend," said the Bangor boy, addressing Antony, "we've got a flying machine in this neck of the woods, in a cosy corner that I'll know if I see it, which I don't just now, and it would be quite a treat to have a look at the craft, if you don't mind a little hunt up the creek."

The Roumanian repeated the one rare smile he had shown after the dash down the river. In purport the guide understood Billy's expressed desire, and instantly relieved all doubt as to the location of the precious aeroplane.

"I saw you put it away," assured Antony, "and it is easy to go straight there."

"No secrets to this man's eyes!" exclaimed Henri. "He had us in view from the first jump out of the box!"

"While you're talking," interrupted Leclaire, "let's first deposit these simoleons in some sand-bank, or any hole in the woods where we can find them again, and with a fair guarantee that nobody else will learn the combination."

Young Trouville passed the word to Gregoire, who seemed to anticipate every asking, and who shouldered his game bag as a sign for departure and compliance with the suggestion of the veteran airman.

The party did not pause in their uphill progress

until they struck the limit of altitude, which was considerable, and a companion high point with that occupied by the "flying whale" and its crew.

On the summit was a circular space of fifteen or twenty feet in diameter, as bare as a billiard ball, and laid like a dinner table with flat stones for plates. The "dish" decoration in this instance was a big black spot in each center.

"It's his nob's smoke-house," was Billy's stage whisper to his chum.

Another development of the woodman's strange ways was presented when he marched forthwith into the narrow beginning cleft of a deep ravine that cut the otherwise rounding incline of the hill-crest on the side most remote from the river—a crevice that was so densely trimmed with marginal evergreen growth and so overtopped by great pines that a sunray would never find a playground there.

With blind faith the aviation quartette stuck to the heels of their temporary leader, and the reward of confidence was theirs at the top of a short flight of steps rudely hewn in a soft sandstone wall of the cavernous declivity. The entrance guard of tanned deer-hide, stretched and thonged to a rack of willow withes, lifted by the lanky guide, revealed a natural grotto, cleverly adapted by the hand of man to dwelling use, a high and wide fireplace, a chimney funnel of baked clay, and the stone floor literally carpeted, ankle deep, with the skins of various animals com-

mon to the famous hunting ground here bordering the Danube.

Into this snuggery the long sleepless and thoroughly fagged four fairly tumbled, while the apparently tireless host pursued hospitable intent by vanishing through the door, with an earthen jar gripped in one hand and a long and keen-bladed knife in the other.

A haunch of venison, swung for cold storage, and out of reach of predatory fangs, from high-lifting tree-bough, contributed juicy cuts for the hungry, and a bubbling spring in the rocky slope its iced nectar to alleviate thirst.

Even the demand by Leclaire and Pentonville for tobacco and pipes was satisfied, and in the fulness of creature comfort the husky pair were curious to know if all this had inception as an incident of warfare.

They were told, through Henri as interpreter, that the entertainer of the hour had been a seeker of peace and rest in these solitudes for years as the exactions of toil and taskmaster relaxed.

"I have won more from these woods," solemnly declared the native son, "than timber for my ships."

An imagery of the early summer in the Danube forests succeeded in the eloquent words of the one inspired—a fairyland of flowers described, of winds weighted with the fragrance of wild blossoms, and of the songs of myriad birds.

" 'The water passeth and the stone remains,' and I may dream here betimes of restored Roumania."

This proverb of his people quoted by Antony had reference, no doubt, to the persistence of the brave inhabitants of this little kingdom—less than one-fifth as big as Texas—in spite of the floods of humanity that have swept over their territory.

But of sentiment and hours of ease there must be an end, for the up and doing spirit of the company in military employment had an imperious call of its own, and again predominant.

The buckskin sacks with their store of hard cash were interred at the base of a giant pine, a very monarch of its kind, and overtopping all others of the hills—"an easy mark," as Billy put it, "for anyone in the know."

"Now," said Leclaire, knocking the ashes out of the oft-used pipe to which he had clung during every waking hour, "let's to business. Furnish an idea, somebody."

Henri, then in position to view the apex of the distant hill where his chum and himself had taken surreptitious peep at the German wonder of the air, was immediately heard from.

"What's the matter with adding that thunder-pumper over there to our fleet?"

The boy was not inclined to be serious when he shot the question back at the veteran advertising for an idea.

It was Pentonville, English to the core, who verbally stumbled over the humor involved.

"By the pied piper," he cried; "it's the very thing!"

CHAPTER V

A DANGEROUS EXPERIMENT

"ALL we'll have to do then," laughed young Trouville, "is to walk over this evening and take the big machine away from the bunch in charge. They looked as though they would stand and deliver without question; eh, Billy?"

"Would not," amended the Bangor boy, with a grin. "There'd be a row that would call out all the troops in the district."

"Drop that circus chat, youngsters," petulantly commanded the Briton, who was in dead earnest regarding the venture he had adopted as his own conception. "Let the long fellow in on the deal, and see if he takes it as a joke."

"Don't get nettled, old top," cajoled Billy; "you shall have a vote on the proposal."

"Put it up to him," insisted Pentonville, indicating the Roumanian by a side turn of the head.

Henri, for the preservation of peace, cheerfully "put it up."

To the surprise of the lads the elected arbiter without hesitation, and with some display of enthusiasm, declared promptly in favor of the scheme, but requested that he be given a little time to consider the method of proceeding.

For reasons he did not reveal, perhaps one of them suggested by the Bangor boy, the shrewd one stood with Billy against an attempted storming of the Teuton aviation camp, yet it was plain to be seen that any prospect of putting a quietus on enemy operation with the "flying whale" delighted the very soul of the king's faithful subject.

"Might as well await the verdict in the den," observed Leclaire, giving a final stamp on the earth that now covered the buried gold. "One more beauty sleep and I am ready to gird on my armor for a fight to the finish."

"There's one thing sure," jollied the flying mate of the speaker; "all the girding you'll need to do will be the buckling of the strap around your waist."

Another thing that turned out to be "sure" was that neither of the veterans had a "star" part in the plot then taking form in the mind of the chief strategist of the woods.

The latter even now was engaged in the mysterious circle on the hilltop, sending aloft at intervals slender smoke columns, which in the clear, still atmospheric conditions were, no doubt, visible for some considerable distance, and apparently of in-

tended communication with similar station among the mountain ranges at the north—the point fixed by the unchanging gaze of the operator in that direction.

At the close of a comfortable afternoon in the grotto, the thoroughly rested and once more fully fed aviators received their first intimation that the "appeal judge" had reached conclusion in the case relating to the proposed "borrowing," by force or otherwise, of the big flying machine on the neighboring elevation.

"My friends," advised Gregoire, with a twinkle in the eye, "I may tell you that we must lead the enemy to a pursuit which will not serve them well at the end."

"A 'wild-goose chase,' you mean," was Billy's prompt aiding suggestion.

The Roumanian passed the boy's amendment with a disposing shrug of the shoulders, and continued:

"With the night, signors, we must divide; two and three."

"What the deuce is he driving at?" impatiently questioned Pentonville.

Henri admonished the big fellow to silence by an uplifted finger.

Antony, this time oblivious of interruption, now especially addressed Our Young Aeroplane Scouts. "We will go now to the place where your aircraft is hidden. The others will remain until I return."

The "others" though by this time rampantly curious to know the drift of Gregoire's thought campaign, resignedly accepted the delay of revelation and sought solace in their pipes.

Up and down hill, through glade and glen, with never halt nor hesitation, the master of woodcraft guided the lads to ground familiar to them by first landing, and no track at all then for Billy and Henri to find on their own hook the spot where their aeroplane was concealed.

"Oh, you beauty!" cried the Bangor boy, when the fine lines of the modern warplane were revealed in the passing of the encircling bushes. The twins had attained full size at sight of that which created for them a mastery in their own right.

As daylight fast waned, the young scouts heard the instructions that would put them to the front as chief active promoters of a work of enticement which promised grief for the opposition or foreboded disaster for the beguiling pair.

Antony confessed that above ground he was a hopeless factor, and in the unfoldment of his scheme more than once, and earnestly, interrogated the boys as to their belief in regard to the speeding qualities of the biplane, which he contemplated with mixed wonder and uncertainty.

It developed that the expected action on the part of the flying twins was to ascend from the woods with the first blush of the sun, circle west as if to

cross the valley, and then strike north with all the motive power that could be forced from the mechanism of the warplane.

"They will follow, sure as fate, and fire as they follow," positively predicted the Roumanian, "as even so they followed and fired at the two men of the air that await me in the ravine over there, and others, too, before them. But fly, fly straight at the blue line of the mountains. Watch for the smoke, as you have watched me make it. By the signal you will come to earth, and no man will you see among the rocks until—until, I say, the trailers shall ground to gather in their prey. Of prophecy to me much has been given, the racial instinct, and to the mind's eye it is wisdom that named you for this service."

"But our comrades, what of them?" asked Billy.

"They shall have a long walk to-night," was the reply—and with the words Antony strode away in the enveloping dusk.

"Feel as though you had had your fortune told, Buddy?"

This from Henri, who thought it was his turn to say something.

The Bangor boy, however, was doing a practical turn, gauging the petrol supply in the aeroplane tanks, taking advantage of what little dim daylight there was left to assist his vision. In lieu of response to the facetious query of his pal, he told the latter that it looked as though the "juice" would

measure enough for at least a "century run," and straight flight to the mountain range designated by Gregoire was not much more than a fourth of the reckoned hundred miles insured by the driving power.

Young Trouville, in the humor at the moment to be a persistent questioner, took another try: "Do you really think they'll 'fall' for it?"

The reference was to the Teuton aviators on the hilltop, and how they would accept the bait the boys proposed to dangle.

"It may be us that'll fall for it," said Billy, making his play of words fit in the memory of what the Roumanian had said about the habit of the "flying whale" crew of "firing as they followed."

A restless night it proved to be for the young scouts, a condition, perhaps, due in part to day sleeping in the grotto, but yet something to be charged to anticipation of exceedingly exciting adventures in the approaching new day.

If the first faint streaks of dawn caught the boys with their eyes closed, it certainly was cat-napping, for the pair then jumped at the task of getting the warplane into clear space, as wide awake as ever in their lives.

With the greatest care the machine was inspected to the very inch, and no sign of slightest damage by dragging in and out of the bush.

"All ready, old top," announced Billy, closely

buttoning his fleece-lined jacket from neck to waist and pulling his cap down to ear-edge.

A gentle incline and an open level contributed to a good getaway. The biplane soared for a few seconds over the tumultuous waters of the Iron Gates, wheeled about and like a homing pigeon made a bee-line northward, purposely guided directly above the German aviation camp, a scant six hundred feet below.

In the passing, brief as it was, the operators of the swiftly speeding aircraft had reminder that the soldier-aviator on the ground were not sleepyheads by any means.

First one rifle popped, then another, until all the hand artillery in the camp seemed to be in use.

If bullets "whistled" a tune in half-notes around and about the flying machine, that was about the extent of the upward fusillade—not a hit of record.

The sequel, though, provided the real showing of the teeth of the aroused denizens of the woodland covert, demonstrated by the uprush of the "thunder-pumper"—so named by Henri—bumble-buzzing and responding in hurtling progress to tremendous propelling force.

"Give her sand Billy boy!" shouted Henri, when he saw that the hare and hounds air game was in full play, and a sorry moment for the scent-maker if a laggard in the lead.

A quarter-mile start did not mean everything it

looked to be, considering a double-motor proposition at the rear, but the young pilot of the smaller craft was making the most of even so much advantage, and for every fifty seconds counting a mile—maybe some better than that towards the finish.

At greater distance, nevertheless, it is probable that the bigger engine would have over-ridden the lighter aeroplane, with all its fleetness, and administered oblivion to the fleeing outfit in entirety.

As it went, the race was all too close for comfort, speaking in concern of the flying twins, and in the twenty-five mile run the gunfire behind was frequent, but, happily, ineffective.

Nearing the mountainous region the warplane lost a fraction of its lead by compelled ascent to higher altitude, but a corresponding enforcement to the pursuing machine later averted proximity that would have given the enemy gunners an opportunity to surely cripple or destroy the winged support of our boys.

Henri had been straining vision to discover the uprising vapor of the expected signal on the mountain top, and it had not shown a single spiral up to the last three miles of approach—then, of relief indescribable, the thin column of smoke wreathed between two peaks almost directly in advance of the course adopted by the young scouts, in accordance with the advice of Antony.

"The high sign, Billy boy! See it?"

"Billy boy" had caught the glimpse before the acclaim of his partner was uttered—and holding the steel beak of the warplane exactly in line with the guiding exhibit, the young pilot drove like mad for the opening which divided the rocky pinnacles.

CHAPTER VI

OUTRACED THE FLYING WHALE

ONCE through the goal-posts—meaning the sky-scraping peaks—the warplane scudded close to the surface of an extensive plateau, plentifully bestrewn with rocks of all shapes and sizes. Out of one of these formations, a bowl-shaped and massive chunk of stone, smoke, in process of stifling, drifted in little waves and eddies. With sight of the least rugged portion of the mountain level, Billy decided to go to earth and trust to the previous assurance of the Roumanian prophet that unseen forces would take a hand at this time and place in succession to the young airmen, who so far had borne the entire brunt of the hazardous undertaking.

No sooner had the warplane settled in offering space than the monster machine, pursuing, whirred and buzzed between the pinnacles, its operators giving vent to shouts of triumphant ring at prospect of bringing to book the will-o'-the-wisp which had led them a chase vastly irritating, in that they had missed an appetizing breakfast and, added chagrin,

their prided airship proven second best in a fair and square test.

The first man out of the double-motored craft when it rolled in grinding way to a full stop on the plateau, a hefty chap with an upcurved mustache, laughed in his throat at close view of the youngsters, standing, in defiant attitude, alongside the race-winning biplane.

"Here, Fritz," said this doughty warrior to another of the kind, following the lead of the speaker in leaping out of the big machine, "are the fellows with whom you were spoiling for a fight. Cut a switch now and have it out."

As he indulged in this bit of sarcasm the bulky aviator started stride toward the young scouts, with "Fritz" walking behind, and apparently much amused at the bold front presented by the boys.

Billy, as he later expressed it, was "feeling hot under the collar" at the flyweight status accorded to Henri and himself, but the deeds of resentment our boys might have performed are not in this chronicle, for the potent reason that "might have" here constituted all further connection of the lads with their own defense.

As if by magic, the existing four on the heights were thrice multiplied in number by the upspringing from the surrounding rocks of a mixed company of rifle-bearing bipeds, who manifested disposition to point the weapons in one direction, that trending

to the foot space which the men in gray occupied.

"Hands up!" The curt command was spoken in good enough German to be readily understood by the persons addressed. The voice was Leclaire's, instantly recognized by the young scouts.

The Teuton who had first been mirthful at the expense of Billy and Henri was not immediately inclined to let go of the revolver-grip protruding from the holster at his side, but a second glance at the ominous array of deadly tubes leveled at his breast evidently convinced the redoubtable veteran that resistance would be foolish. Fritz was likewise persuaded before he had made more than one move in backtracking to the big machine which had plunged its crew into a well-set trap.

Quickly relieved of the pistols they carried, the prisoners accepted the inevitable with an air of stoical resignation, and also casting a furtive glance at Billy and Henri, who, no doubt, had assumed enlarged proportions in the eyes of the captives.

The first words directly addressed to the youthful pair, however, came from the lips of Pentonville, and of hearty and unrestrained commendation.

"Of the salt of the earth, laddies," cried the big Briton, "you're crystals, and what's more, 'all wool and a yard wide!'"

"That's some mix, old top," laughed the Bangor boy, to hide the embarrassment with which he was invariably afflicted when subjected to praise.

The grave Gregoire had his turn then to show approbation of the manner in which his chosen agents had acquitted themselves. "It was well done—and as foretold." This quiet but none the less impressive declaration of the chief director of the strategic success had a mystic meaning all its own.

Among the hardy mountaineers surrounding the central figures it was quite evident that Antony was a conceded leader, and one commanding the greatest respect, for his every word created alert attention and evoked instant obedience.

A wave of the hand from him and the assemblage entire, with the exception of the chief himself and the airmen of the allies' squadron, as quickly dispersed as they had risen from the rocks when receiving at rifle points the flying Teutons. The latter couple disappeared with their guards.

With subsidence of excitement, Leclaire relapsed into wonted composure, and indulged in complaint in regard to ache in the legs. "Since I first joined the aviation corps," he growled, "I haven't done the half of the walking that was enforced upon me last night. How is it with you, 'Pent?' "

The English aviator, as if reminded of something, bent over to rub his knees, a mute acknowledgment that he, too, felt the effects of the strenuous stroll taken in trail of the tall Roumanian.

Billy and Henri found their center of interest in the "flying whale," which they could now inspect.

They discovered by close examination an aeroplane standing about eight feet from the ground, the wings of the usual design, but the body of the craft shaped like that of a fat fish. The motor was enclosed in the head, and at the sides, where the eyes of the fish would be, were two windows. The operator or observer could look out from above the fish's back or from the sides, through the eyes.

"It's an odd contraption," commented the Bangor boy, "but it runs like any of the rest of 'em. Guess we could manage it all right, Buddy."

"Like a top, pard," promptly agreed the other twin. "And would you look at the bombs in the basket," continued young Trouville; "and the guns, and, say, Billy, the tankage of this thing is immense. Plenty of petrol here, I'll wager."

"Best of all," added the lad from Maine, "there's nothing now to tie us here, and we won't have to leave 'Lee' and 'Pent' in the lurch, either."

The enthusiasts had not spared a thought at the moment of any such contingency as a contrary view on the part of their Roumanian friend relative to the disposal of the captured airship.

This, however, did not prove to be the issue upon which hinged the question of an early departure of the members of the Demonet flotilla. "On the way to nowhere" presented, with the giving of practical reconsideration, no appeal to the high riders, and a

stronger plea, it will be seen, held them for a time in Wallachia.

It was not a period of inaction, this continued sojourn, in association with the active Gregoire—"not by a long shot," quoting the irrepressible Barry boy.

The others in the little company had now joined the younger scouts in inspection of the monster machine and its equipment. The technical talk that followed between the airmen had no hold on the attention of Antony. He presently stood apart from his companions and immersed in meditation apparently far removed from, to him, such trivialities as motor merits or aeroplane makes.

Noting the attitude of the Roumanian, Billy gave his pal an elbow poke along with the whispered advice that "he's framing up another destiny card for you, sonny."

Quite matter of fact, though, was the next breaking of silence by the crafty chief. Pointing to the mechanical bird of which the Germans had just lost possession, he said:

"This it is best to leave here for safe-keeping until such hour as it will serve in returning you men of the air to your command and when we shall learn with certainty where in this war-torn land can be found the battle-front you seek."

"How in the mischief," demanded Henri, "are we going to find the fighting crowd if we don't make a stagger at looking for them?"

"There's a way, I think," was the assuring reply of the Roumanian.

"Let it go at that," interposed Billy. "You ought to know by this time, sonny, whenever this chap 'thinks' anything it's good medicine."

The boy talked straight American in making this remark.

In accord with Gregoire's decision, the "flying whale" was given protected lodgment under a wide projecting ledge well within the secret mountain haunts of the Transylvanian war eagles, not before, however, the young scouts had replenished the tanks in their aeroplane from the plentiful supply of petrol carried by the captured machine.

Preceding this "tapping" Billy and Henri had been surprised and delighted by the unexpected advice that the warplane was not, also, to be put in storage here, but to be utilized in certain further operations contemplated by the present directing power of the party.

And, too, confounding belief was the manner in which Leclaire and Pentonville accepted the arrangement that meant a repetition of the long tramp across rough ground endured by them, and with so much complaint in aftermath.

"We've got our second wind," stoutly announced the big Briton, "and it will be blooming easy this trip. It's you for the riding, laddies, and small reward for the chances you took coming over."

The other veteran aeroplanist evinced the same whole-souled desire to disavow any and all symptoms of leg-strain that would make irksome a second forced march of long distance within an hour or two after wearily completing the first.

These good comrades were determined that Billy and Henri should be free of reluctance to take the soft side of travel while their friends, aviators, too, traversed again the rocky road as pedestrians.

Our boys would have argued the question in favor of the others had not Antony firmly insisted that there be no change of program, which provided, as before, the first going of the walkers, the same trio, and the later start of the warplane.

The Roumanian advised a course southeast for the return journey of the flying machine, a low flight when nearing the hills, that the aviators might avoid, behind the elevation of the summit containing the grotto, any lookout established on the companion high point by the extra crew of the big craft which was not coming back.

"Mark down by signal, as here," directed Gregoire. "I will be waiting to show you a level along the slope which you might pass once, and again, without seeing. When the sun is there," indicating a skyline traced by the square-ending of the plateau west, "you will take wing." A shrill whistle by the chief brought in long stride one of the mountaineers, evidently waiting nearby for the summons, and who,

after Antony had briefly spoken in a new turn of the tongue, which was even beyond Henri's understanding, made gesture of invitation to the lads to follow him.

At the base of a huge and dome-shaped rock, which apparently blocked further progress in the path pursued, the young scouts paused for a backward look.

Of animate life the plateau was bare—the guide and accompanying aviators had disappeared.

CHAPTER VII

HAZARDOUS HUNT FOR NEWS

In "sitting at meat" with the mountain men, as their hospitality is termed, Billy and Henri were more than ever impressed with the fact that once more they had wandered out of the beaten path of travel, for in this great highland region, its popular customs, language, and costumes are preserved in all their primitive originality.

"The mountains cradled and brought our race to the manhood of its existence," say the Roumanians, but the boys were discovering in each new experience among these people something about them that the keen observers did not know before—in Roumania itself; in Bessarabia, belonging to Russia; in Transylvania, the eastern front of Hungary; in Bukowina, an Austrian crownland—the hardy breed predominating in all—the sojourners found a mixture with many constituents.

As the boys had also learned, the language of the country, however, must be classed as one of the Romance tongues, though it contains a large admixture

of foreign elements which often puzzled young Trouville, the artist of varied vocabulary, and which kept him guessing on this occasion, when his chum and himself were special guests of the motley collection of Alpinists.

Of easy comprehension, though, was that, vouched for as they had been, the young scouts could count every member of the solemn conclave as a friend and brother—the manner of the mountaineers demonstrated such favor, even if a word or two in every sentence expressed fell short of understanding.

So greatly interested were the youths in the strange and secret ways of the fastness, freely and with all confidence exhibited by the highlanders, that the sun had touched the mark designated by Gregoire without notice by the aviators—and of which defection of memory the lads were reminded by the alert individual, to whom the Roumanian chief had last spoken before his own departure in the morning.

"Gee whiz, sonny!" exclaimed the Bangor boy; "we've been asleep at the switch, and have some lost time to make up!"

It can well be imagined of what small consequence five or ten minutes off a schedule would mean to a mile-a-minute aeroplane, handled by drivers who knew just how to get every ounce of power into use.

"Good-bye, fellows," cried Billy, as the machine lifted in ready response to the guiding lever.

"So long, my hearties," chimed in the other twin, turning in the observer's perch to give an imitation of shaking hands at a distance.

Following instructions, the pilot of the warplane deviated considerably from direct route to the hills of the Danube border, for well he knew what had been in the mind of the wily Roumanian in advising such procedure. On the hilltop which had harbored the Teuton airship it could be surely predicted that powerful field-glasses were in constant use, scanning the upper reaches in lookout for the return of the mighty machine with another score of efficiency as a destroyer.

Making up for the enforced detour, in point of time, Billy almost equaled the rate of speed that had brought the aeroplane he was operating into the mountains ahead of the double-motored pursuer.

In lowering altitude for concealed flight behind the summit which obstructed the view of the hostile watchers on the companion crest, the Bangor boy heard the sharply accented advice of his pal that the signal smoke was showing above the trees at the left of the incoming sweep.

A delicate bit of manipulation was required to drop into the woodland clearing without "strafing" a tall pine, but the young pilot performed the feat to a nicety, after getting a "mark-down," furnished by

Pentonville, in the simple process of waving a parti-colored handkerchief flagged to a sapling staff, cut and trimmed by the big aviator in anticipation of a difficult descent by his young friends.

Gregoire, of course, was detained in the smoke-producing circle at the very top of the hill, and also, no doubt, keeping a wary eye on the gray-garbed neighbors across the divide.

The aviation quartette were hobnobbing in the grotto when the signal-worker returned, and, in his own peculiar style, manifested the pleasure within him at the sight of the young scouts.

"Anything doing on the other hill, sir?" briskly questioned Henri.

The Roumanian shook his head in negative answer, but adding the significant remark: "Angry hornets oft strike at unseeing eyes."

"I'll bet, boss," volunteered Billy, "the bugs will never catch you with lids down."

Whether or not this compliment carried full weight in the language essayed by the lad to convey it, there was no proof in the gravely composed features of the recipient, nor in the next words that he spoke.

"To-night, signors," he said, "it may be given to our ears what you most desire to know—where can be found the army corps to which you belong. If we had one among us who could read what the wires are saying, much more might be revealed."

Henri, reclining on a bearskin rug, sprang upright like a jumping-jack, and with eager proclamation: "No trouble about that, sir; telegraphy is one of the things that came early and easy to me. Billy here can tackle the code, too, in a pinch."

"Trained to the fine point, you fellows," was Pentonville's admiring comment, when young Trouville told it over in English.

With the coming of night, Antony expressed satisfaction with impending weather conditions, as black as could be, the air misty with a drizzle of rain, in which fine particles of snow intermingled. The guide perspective, intimately acquainted with every foot of country round about, a sure pathfinder, in dark as in daylight, needed only the protective cover as afforded to successfully circumvent such vigilance as might be maintained by a garrison guard in a section over which the main bodies of troops had already passed.

Just before the little company left the grotto, Gregoire confided in the others relative to the objective point of the journey in the dark—no place else than Turnu Severin, the very town in which had been centered the ship-building activities of the Roumanians before the first Austrian attack had put him out of business.

In seeking information of particular value to the comrades he had adopted as brothers of the cause to which his life was pledged, the old fox of the hills

had, no doubt, selected the mentioned town, now in possession of the enemy, as the most desirable point to quickly operate, owing to inside knowledge he possessed.

Turnu Severin, as the guided party presently ascertained, is located on high ground and partly hidden from the Danube river by trees. It is supposed to derive its name from the ruins of an old tower in the vicinity which is said to have been built in commemoration of one of the victories of the Roman emperor Serverus.

The first halt of the five, whose progress for the half dozen miles from the hill base had been remarkably speedy for a blind venture, was near the village of Kladova, which in Roman times was known as Egeta, and where after more than 1800 years, are still to be seen the remains of the famous Trojan bridge across the Danube.

Being but a short distance now from the point for which they were headed, caution was more than ever the watchword with the travelers, and Antony here paused that he might singly reconnoiter before continuing advance. While the aviators rested in the dry bed of a one-time water course winding down from the higher ground, the Roumanian faded from sight in the frontal shadows.

Military occupation in the vicinity was indicated by the occasional passing on the highway, a few hundred yards from the spot where the airmen were

lying in wait, of outriding cavalrymen, with jingling spur and the clank of saber against stirrup, gruff voices and the snort of war steeds in taking to the climb of the ascending road. Between the trees on the elevation to the right lights flashed or dimly glowed, and every once in a while the hail of sentries, one to another, could be plainly heard by the hidden four.

Billy ventured a peep at the face of the battered silver watch, to which he had clung through many a campaign, guarding the tiny flame of the illuminating match within the lining of his cap. "Eight-thirty," he whispered to his companions. "Seems to me the old scout is a long while getting back."

The "old scout," however, tried the patience of the aviators to no greater extent than five minutes additional, and in sudden and silent lowering of himself into the earth-cut containing his comrades planted a heavy foot on the head of the sitting Leclaire. "Say, guvner, save my brains," hoarsely remonstrated the disturbed veteran.

A vise-like grip on the shoulder of the airman shut off further protest. A voice in low pitch urged haste in getting to the level, and, where, as the first link in a hand-chain, the leader set the pace for a rapid forward movement, which soon merged the night-runners in avenues of timber, corded high on all sides, and in close hearing the wash of the big river against long rows of piling.

Through this maze of obstructions the knowing one made free travel, and if the quartette at his heels several times suffered "barked" shins, they offered no complaint aloud, though Pentonville once was almost guilty of muffled profanity.

Having passed like phantoms another littered area, which Antony quietly informed Henri was the shipyard of the Danube Steamship Navigation Company, the guide for a minute or two stood in attitude of an intent listener, after bringing his companions into close formation by successive reaches with his lengthy arms. The lights of the town were now showing directly above, and the risk of discovery was greatly augmented.

But not even the silhouette of a soldier had risen between the view of the still group and the height ahead, no sound came of echoing footstep in the apparently deserted, ascending street.

Then it was that the Roumanian took the chance of a dash across the lighted open space dividing the shipyard cover from the first of an extended line of dwellings on the north side of the town thoroughfare leading up from the river.

Without challenge or shot to check, the passage was accomplished by the sprinters, and backed against the door of the corner house, a substantial two-story structure, Gregoire noiselessly indulged that customary smack of the palms which betokened something to his liking.

The next application of those sinewy hands, however, did not serve a habit, but a much more practical and beneficial purpose to all concerned. Behind the man a chain rattled, a bolt rasped in its socket, and, lo and behold, the heavy oaken barrier guarding the entrance of the domicile gave backward on creaking hinges.

Now the measured tramp of a soldier squad at the street crossing above—the relief, perhaps, of the river patrol.

In the march downgrade it may be stated that to the infantrymen no cause of suspicion beckoned from the corner dwelling—like all its duplicates in the row, abandoned to the rats and the bats.

Perhaps, again, inside, the rarely smiling Antony softly clapped the flesh cymbals at the wrist ends of his arms!

CHAPTER VIII

A LISTENING ASSIGNMENT

As the rhythmic tread outside diminished in sound, Gregoire, active as a cat in his movements, sprang at the bar he had laid across the door in the first instant after hasty ingress, given sight for the proceeding by the flashlight which Henri produced at the quick whispered word of the Roumanian.

The leader made aperture sufficient for survey of the immediate front of the premises, and nothing showing except the pale shimmer cast in the roadway by some illuminant higher up, Antony stepped aside, with a barely audible request that his comrades pass out. Once alone within the doorway, the wily one, seemingly reminded of some neglected detail, withdrew for a second or two further into the nouse, and when he emerged, gently closing the door behind him, a goodly length of slender but dependable rope was coiled about one of his shoulders.

It was soon apparent that the plan of the old fox for entering the town did not include, in initial stage at least, any parade of avenues devoted to public use or likely to be frequented by soldiers on or off night duty. For dark and devious ways within these borders, in the opinion of his bewildered followers, the former citizen of the burg proved a wizard at finding.

A final scrambling ascent and the party were among the trees that screened the town from the river, and the crucial test of nerve at hand. If the object of the expedition was to be served, the opportunity offered less than half a city square distant —the headquarters of the hostile holding force. A large structure of stone, of greater length than breadth, had been preempted for the mentioned purpose by the commanding officer of the invaders, and inside all light and life prevailed. Getting nearer without getting caught was the problem which now confronted the news seekers.

Under the fur cap of the tall Roumanian must be the solving.

That reticent person at the moment had in contemplation a number of covered provision or munition wagons parked near the south end of the headquarters building, there cutting off the direct line of light where it might otherwise have extended almost to the edge of the grove in which Gregoire and his followers were lurking.

The horses belonging to the caravan were evidently quartered elsewhere, and no movement of any kind could be noted among or about the ponderous vehicles.

Antony tapped Henri on the shoulder. "To us an advantage, signor," murmured the old scout, "and a warrant for time saving—a few steps from one shelter to another."

Young Trouville made no reply, but the thought struck him that any one of the "few steps" might mean a nabbing of the whole party, and no earthly chance of making a good defense, either before or after capture.

Billy had remarked earlier in the evening to Pentonville, when the latter worthy was conveniently close enough to catch the words, that "his nobs has a sort of 'second sight,' or I'm a Jack rabbit."

"He's a queer duck, all right," conceded the Briton, also in subdued tone.

Whether or not the Roumanian actually possessed the "double vision," it can be surely asserted, in the course of recorded events, that he was equipped in some manner to perform at least a semblance of magic.

A few minutes later the fearless five had crawled under the army wagons, and almost within arm's length of one of the big windows, deeply framed in the granite walls of the long building, and from out

the partially lifted sash of which was wafted the pungent odor of some particularly strong tobacco burning in a half dozen pipes.

The latter estimate is based on the fact that six soldiers were counted in sight by the inlookers, and every man in the group was smoking, including the fellow with a yellow paper visor over his eyes, and who was listening to the tick of a telegraph instrument, mounted upon a "knocked together" deal table.

Occasionally the operator would take a jab with his pencil at the paper-pad before him, and hand the sheet to a broad-shouldered individual sitting a little apart from the rest and wearing the insignia of colonel's rank, but most of the time the telegrapher took it easy over the dots and dashes, indulging in a running fire of comment at the news being flashed over the wires along the main line of the Budapest-Bucharest railway, with which this military station was in tap.

Henri was getting a lot of it in his mind, though the sounder inside he could not always hear distinctly, owing to the jovial habit of one or more of the interior party in pounding the table when the tidings announced had an extra touch of Teuton triumph—and that seemed about the way everything had really been going during the preceding twelve hours.

Three hundred miles distant, during the whole

day Germano-Bulgarian cannon had been thundering in heavy fire upon Braila, the important Roumanian oil and grain depot in northeastern Wallachia; there had been fierce fighting at Matchin bridgehead; along the Moldavian frontier hard-fought battles had raged from morning until night —and so of stirring events the ticker kept telling to ears that understood until there had been reeled off a story, even though covering brief period, which put the Balkan campaign to the fore among the war zones as principal producer in the week of lurid activities.

Young Trouville in the first half hour of his listening assignment had failed to gather from the gripping record the information most desired. But in the tapping of the sounder there was finally produced something which caused the boy to quickly put a hand-curve behind his right ear, as a special aid to hearing, and also made use of elbows in getting a little further front. Billy, however, himself comprehending what was then passing on the wires, restrained any further risky advance upon the part of his pal by applying an ankle hold to the latter.

The Roumanian, Pentonville and Leclaire were keeping watch at the rear end of the wagon, and were wholly unconscious that there was a telegraphic ten-strike in the making for their side.

The general of the brigade with which Demonet's aerial flotilla was identified had been named and reported at Galatz, on the Danube, between the Sereth and Pruth rivers.

In the passing telegraph report reference was also made to Jassy, as the new capital of Roumania, since the fall of Bucharest. The boys knew that this city was in northeastern Moldavia, near the Russian boundary.

Satisfied with what they had learned, the young scouts were of a notion now to elbow backward, pass the word "go" to their companions, and so quit a locality where at any minute trouble might fall like a thousand of brick. Just as Billy started the retiring wriggle, one of the soldiers, sitting near the telegraph operator, suddenly arose from his chair, yawned, lifted his arms for a stretch, and sauntered to the window, directly facing the wagon under which the daring intruders were ensconced. Muttering something about the air inside being thick enough to cut with a knife, the complainant hoisted the window-sash a foot or two higher, put his head out into the night and deeply inhaled the fresher brand of ozone.

Henri had a little chill chasing up and down his spine, for the out-looker seemed so near, magnified as he was in the lighted aperture, that the boy imagined, sure as fate, immediate discovery of himself, being the foremost of the five, and at the moment

head and shoulders beyond the shadow of the overtopping vehicle.

But the pure air enthusiast had no more than a careless glance at so much of the close ground perspective as was covered by the illumination from within—all the attention he had to give outside was devoted to the black dome aloft, in probable figuring on prospective weather conditions and filling his lungs with fresh air.

Succeeding the trepidation which had first assailed him when the soldier unexpectedly appeared at the window, young Trouville found even more compelling the incentive to stare, for other reason, at the face framed in the nearby opening.

Could the lad have spoken aloud it would have been the one word that was trembling on his lips—"Roten!"

Those who followed the adventures of "Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in Germany" will recall the name as belonging to a noted Austrian aviator, with whom the heroes of these records had been associated for a time among the snow-capped peaks of the Carpathians, and when the boys were, by force of circumstances, identified with another service.

Billy, only aware that his business then was to flatten to the ground like a pancake and keep as still as a mouse, did not have the advantage of recognition afforded his chum, and believed the latter was

solely influenced in preserving rigid attitude through the wholesome fear of being "spotted" by the man in the window.

This tension, as luck would have it, soon relaxed with the removal of the cause. The army airman inside turned his broad back to the window and rejoined the group, all standing now, about the telegraph table.

The young scouts made haste—indeed, all haste—in moving, feet foremost, upon the rear guard, which trio, getting the sibilant tip, employed some speedy but noiseless retrograde tactics. With Gregoire in the lead, the party regained the grove with less than five minutes to spare before the bustle of the new guard mount could be plainly heard, which included the distribution of sentries along the avenues on both sides of the headquarters building, now darkened to view by the extinguishing of most of the lights within the building.

Billy took a peek at his watch. In fifteen minutes the midnight hour would arrive.

Little time had been given the boys to enlighten their comrades as to the window-listening results, but Henri briefed a story to Antony, which produced a nod of approbation from that worthy, while the Bangor boy as shortly detailed the proceedings for the benefit of Pentonville and Leclaire. However, it was not until the Roumanian had set the pace

for proposed retirement from Turnu Severin that young Trouville had a chance to tell the other twin about seeing Roten.

"That boss sailor here!" exclaimed Billy in astonishment; "then I'll bet he's got a whole fleet along with him!"

The old scout in front faced about for a second and held up his hand with an admonitory hiss for silence.

It was quite evident that the chief had a new map in his mind for the way out. Confused as they had been by the circuitous method adopted for entrance, the aviation quartette could not be fooled into any belief that they were leaving the town by the same route. The footing now was on the level, in contrast to previous and continuous up-scramble, which, if retraced, would assure an equally difficult descent.

Somewhere ahead in the rugged path pursued by the sure-footed Gregoire sounded the muffled roar of falling water, and mist in the atmosphere put damp impress upon the faces of the on-pushing five.

When the guide had proceeded some fifty yards further he halted, and with arms outstretched in bar to the others in the rear.

Far down, in unknown depths of a narrow gorge, the concentrated force of river rapids lashed and splashed great ledges of rock.

At the verge of a dizzy height the Roumanian turned, raising his voice above the combatting commotion of the wild waters below, to proclaim:

"Kazan!"

CHAPTER IX

WITH TREASURE ABOARD

With the now breaking daylight, the aviators had their first view of the scenically magnificent Kazan defile of the Danube, from the Hungarian side of the river, for the night walkers had slightly overstepped the Wallachian border in their rapid pedestrian transit of the past few hours. "Not enough to hurt, however," as Billy put it, when he learned of the encroachment. "Some rapids," was a further comment of the Bangor boy, looking down upon the rush of the mighty river here restricted to a width of less than 200 yards, and having a depth in some places of over 200 feet.

Though now qualified as world travelers, the boys had not in memory a wilder or more impressive bit of scenery than afforded by this narrow gorge, through which for hundreds of years have flowed back and forth the tides of Christian and Mohammedan civilization.

But scenery just now was a "side issue" with An-

tony. He had taken this shortest way, well known to him, to reach the mountains, beloved of Roumanians, and from where he could return, as he pleased, to the lesser hills of the Danube which duty impelled him to roam. To have essayed a back-tracking from Turnu Severin by the same route as incoming was not a daylight proposition. Besides, if the now confirmed loss of the Teuton airship had stirred up a hornets' nest, the old scout desired to place his charges where there was least likelihood of their being stung.

Weary as they were, the airmen without protest responded to the urging of Gregoire to make a start northward over a succession of precipitous hills, some free of vegetation and others clad with forests of beech, walnut and oak. Where such cover prevailed there were grateful periods of rest, plenty of ice-cold water in numerous springs, but rather scant rations of corn-bread and jerked venison, for the Roumanian had ruled against heavy haversacks in the venture of the past night.

Within the next hour Billy made declaration that "this air is getting nifty," suiting action to the words by turning up the collar of his fleece-lined jacket.

It was the breath of the mountains that the boy felt, for the party were at the foot of an acclivity that was half cliff, half rock slide, and which promised a strenuous period of slip and scramble and

climb, leading to the mere goat trails in even greater altitude, the passing of which set all hearts to pumping and would turn the heads of any unaccustomed to ranging in high places with dread bordering of bottomless crevices.

Happily, none of the little company were troubled with dizzy spots under their caps—the only worry about heights to the four aviators was the labor of surmounting them without the air of motors and wings. As for the Roumanian, it was all routine to him. The only concession he made to danger along the icy ridges near the mountain top was the habit of the Alpinist guide to link to himself by rope the scalers he was leading. His canny foresight had provided for this emergency.

The muscle-straining ascent—thanks be it in the minds of the tired trailers of the tireless chief—had a finish, marked by the fragrance of wood smoke in the air, and later, joyful sound, by the clinking of cooking cans in the hands of members of the mountaineer band, with whom the incomers had before mingled on the memorable occasion when the "flying whale" was led into this fastness for easy capture.

Soup and stew, doughnuts of a sort, and little cups of Turkish coffee set the aviators right as to food, and next satisfied, in a cave scooped out of the rock, was the irresistible desire for sleep. By and by—all too soon it seemed to them—the drowsy air-

men felt the gentle pressure of a hand upon their knees, and awoke to face the glorious panorama of a sunset gilding the mountain peaks as far as the eye could see.

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed Billy, in observing the time of day; "I had no idea that our snooze was so long!"

Gregoire, as wide awake as ever, was just then engaged in a confidential confab with his second in command among the mountain men, but upon the appearance of the aviators immediately joined them, and, addressing Henri, said:

"With me one more journey, signor, and then, as needs be, farewell until the better days. We three, the other younger one and you and I, must fare for the hills this night. There will be known, as the stars read, the hour and means of your departure. Mayhap," continued the old scout, "contrary forces shall work delay, but they will not finally prevail. It is written, I say."

When Leclaire and Pentonville were told that they were the ones this time to be left in the mountain rendezvous, they were not at all resentful, the latter jovially hailing the boys as "the new walking delegates."

The additional intimation by Henri that this trip had largely to do with a getaway plan in the interest of the four, then forming in the fertile brain of the Roumanian, lifted the spirits of the veteran airmen

to the top-notch of enthusiasm, evidenced by the planting of vigorous thumps between the shoulders of the informant.

Antony, gazing for a moment at the few stars twinkling frostily overhead, then beckoned to the boys to get in line for departure, and the trio were off in the gathering darkness for that wearing hike to the faraway hills.

Before dawn the three were snugly at rest in the grotto, a retreat so cunningly and completely concealed by arrangement of the bush growth about the entrance that there had been little fear on the part of its regular habitant of unwelcome invasion during his absence.

The young scouts were sound asleep when their guide made daybreak visit to his established post of observation and communication on the hilltop, but the word that soon reached them with the hurried return of Gregoire had the lads on their feet in a second.

Aeroplanes were hovering over the wooded district, five of them—the number indicated by uplifted fingers and thumb of the news bearer.

"Roten and his push, I'll be bound," promptly declared Henri.

"Didn't I tell you," broke in the other twin, "that that fellow never traveled without a fleet for company?"

One of those "contrary forces" anticipated by the

prophet of the highlands, it appeared, was already "working" against immediate inauguration of the ground leaving plan for the stranded aviators. But did the opposite influence "finally prevail?" We shall see.

Nothing would satisfy Billy and Henri, after hearing of the presence of a flock of flying machines in the immediate vicinity, but getting out where they could see for themselves the aerial manœuvers, and to confirm, if possible, the belief that the speeders in the upper reaches belonged to the Austrian flotilla with which the lads had once traveled over billows of snow.

The youngsters appreciated the fact that even with powerful glasses as an aid to vision, their ground position would have to be high and the flight movement of the air squadron correspondingly low before there could exist the slightest hope of identification in the case of any individual driver among the operators of the warplanes. Knowing, however, that the noted chief and aeroplane duelist, Roten, had arrived in Turnu Severin, comparatively nearby, the young scouts had it in their minds to bank on the chance of picking out this particular personage in the encircling aerialists, if in no other way than by the special make of machine cultivated by the mentioned leader—as the boys remembered it, of greater length than the regulation warplane.

Not that the lads would derive any known benefit

from such recognition aloft, but simply establishing a certainty that if it were Roten at the head of this topside hunting party, he would stick like glue to any project engaging his attention in unwavering line of duty.

Well aware that every visible yard of earth was being subjected to the scrutiny of keen-eyed observers overhead, through binocles of superior manufacture, the flying twins had no need to be advised by Antony that keeping in close cover was the only safe policy for the present, yet they prevailed upon the Roumanian to keep on "moling" through the bushes until the trio reached the hill-crest and the burrow there maintained by the old scout for emergency purpose of concealment while engaged in smoke telegraphy.

Two of the aeroplanes were flying quite low at the time, so near, indeed, to the hilltop that every line of their rigging was plain to view, and the heads and shoulders of the occupants showing full size. Gregoire, who knew such a lot about everything, except flying machines, had shifted his rifle to hand for repelling action, when Henri, noting the movement and attitude, gripped the wrist of the rifleman, with underbreath statement that "there'll be no comedown here, chief—the sledding's too rough."

What with rocks and brush, trees and trailing vines, and only a four-foot circle clear, the boy's

assertion that "the sledding's too rough" was well supported, and, too, made by one wholly competent to judge.

Hardly had young Trouville emphasized his expert opinion when another of the warplanes, the largest of the collection, swept over the hilltop, scarce three hundred yards above the crest, and the observer therein leaning outward, with field glasses aimed downward at the ridge, covering every point in the passing.

"That's the kingpin of the lot, I'm sure," muttered Billy, getting a snapshot view of the lookout man through a binocle, which he quickly lowered for fear that a chance sunray should strike a betraying flash from the upturned lenses.

This "fine-combing" of the suspicioned territory by the supposed "last say" aviator apparently concluded the morning effort of the aerial squadron to locate hereabouts the nest of suspects no doubt reputed to have had a hand in the disappearance of the Teuton airship. In less than twenty minutes not an aeroplane was in sight—all had landed on the elevation where Billy and Henri first viewed the "flying whale" at rest.

"The next visit, I suppose, will be on foot," remarked Henri, as the three picked their way through rocks and brush in roundabout return to the grotto.

Antony nodded gloomy assent. "That which I have been doing here," he said, "has not passed with-

out notice, and the devilfish that was planted over there was set to catch the smoke-maker. But"—the old scout actually laughed—"the catcher it was that was caught. Naught will they find one day hence, though they come in battalions."

"That means, I guess," was Billy's aside to his chum, "a wholesale move, flying machine and all."

Serving that very end, indeed, were the boys immediately directed by the Roumanian to prepare their warplane for flight at a moment's notice, if necessary, and make sure of a rise without hindrance. Though this assignment was productive of prompt and satisfactory results, including eye measurement of the runaway space and fixing the right angle to get out of the woodland clearing in avoidance of treetops, the getaway order was not ripe for the giving when the aviators reported "all ready" to the directing power. The aforesaid directing power was busy with an anticipatory job of his own, wielding an iron hand-spike as a lever in setting to balancing poise over the grotto entrance a huge slab of shale.

"Looks like the family was going away for the winter," was a pleasantry perpetrated by Billy upon the other twin.

The Roumanian evidently did not propose to "miss the train," for he had the boys in tow in the next minute or two, each provided with a shovel of crude make, but good for stirring up earth just the

same, and speedily to be put to that use at the base of a giant pine, a monarch of the forest before which the young scouts had before made obeisance with three other bearers of precious metal.

The waiting warplane was to carry the ballast of a treasure galleon—gold-weighted bags of buckskin.

CHAPTER X

SUDDEN SAILING ORDERS

"WHAT'S the hour by your pewter clock?" asked Henri, when his pal and himself, at the bidding of Gregoire, held station alongside the warplane, awaiting the return of the Roumanian from the last visit of the day to the lookout point.

"Five o'clock, if you must know," replied the Bangor boy, rather inclined to resent this playful reflection upon his reliable time-piece.

"Hope the boss has found the coast clear," continued young Trouville, "for, really, Buddy, I'm itching to break away."

"Scratch, sonny, if that will comfort you any," advised Billy. "There is nothing to do, that I can see, but wait."

The adviser just then happened to glance toward the growth that fringed the open space in the forest on the west side, and when the bushes parted to re-

veal the tall figure of Antony, whose soundless approach was that of a deer stalker and pastmaster of woodcraft.

When the cushion-footing of the old scout brought him face to face with the lads, they noted that he was carrying behind his shoulders a roll of animal hides, the same, in part, that had adorned the floor and bough-beds of the grotto—the young scouts recognizing the particularly handsome skin of a silver fox, which they had greatly admired while inmates of the cavern home of the Roumanian.

"Looks like you were saying good-bye to these parts, signor," was Henri's salutation.

Gregoire shook his head in negative response. "Only for a time," he added in that deliberate way of his; "for these," indicating the pack across his shoulders, "there is use, and you shall see what Constantine will fashion from them."

Whoever "Constantine" was, he evidently awaited at the other end of the journey the boys were about to take, for the old scout deposited the pack within the frame of the aeroplane.

This disposal made, the Roumanian pointed northward, saying: "It is a twice-run course for you, signors, and on the mountain we will meet again next sunrise. Now away!"

The bid to fly found a startling echo somewhere on the ridge above—a bugle half-note and an an-

swering halloo deeply sounding in the ravine beyond.

Billy and Henri, about to mount the warplane, halted movement, and fixed uncertain gaze upon their fur-capped comrade, standing stockstill in the center of the clearing, his rifle off shoulder and in quick-fire position.

But the hesitation of the aviators to make sail served to attract to themselves a most peremptory gesture from the old warrior—a wordless command to get into flight forthwith.

Though loath to desert the chief when trouble was brewing, the lads, war-trained in discipline, had no alternative but to obey, and prompted, too, by the belief that their companion could outwit anything on two legs in the Danube territory.

Once above the trees, Billy sent the craft whizzing in direction straightway from the woodland where the hostile hunt was now in full cry, and it was not until the pilot had traversed in easterly course a ten-mile stretch that he made turn toward the mountains, rising blue-black to the lowering clouds.

Henri kept an eye oblique for some aerial demonstration over the hilltops, but in the shading dusk not even the flutter of a flying machine at the rear did the boy observe.

The Bangor boy beat the real darkness nearly a quarter of an hour in the drive for the plateau, and

a willing band of the faithful waiting to hustle both flyers and flying machine into safe quarters, and where a needle in a haystack would be as easy to find as they.

Gregoire's lieutenant, when informed, as best Henri could tell it, of the situation in which the leader was figuring, as one against a probable many, did not seem at all alarmed. Young Trouville's broad interpretation of the comment of the mountaineer had it in effect that "only by the fall of the sky upon him could the hillman be delivered to the hands of the enemy."

Oddly enough it never occurred to the flying twins to make a single inquiry as to the safe-keeping of the precious cargo of the warplane. Instinctive confidence in the patriots holding this fastness was a bond all sufficient. Of the nation's cash all were equal as trustees.

Of more concern, then, was the question, soon after landing, as to the whereabouts of Leclaire and Pentonville, which query required no other answer than the bass voice of the big Briton singing, or attempting to warble, a music hall ditty in some hole in the rock beyond the square of the plateau. At the same time, in the same vicinity, a native artist with the bow was drawing plaintive gypsy music out of a violin.

The veteran airmen, however, were out in the open like a shot when they heard the first hail from

Billy, and Leclaire growled like a bear because they were not in the front rank of the reception committee when the young scouts came in on the wing. "Nobody gave us the tip," complained the disappointed flyer. "But it's the glad hand we've got for you fellows just the same," he concluded.

"How'd you leave his nobs?" asked the Englishman.

"Face to front and loaded for bear," replied the Bangor boy, who then set forth all that had happened since the four aviators last divided in pairs.

"Catch a weasel asleep and say in one breath that the old scout won't win out in those haunts of his. Put the coffee on early, for he'll be here to breakfast."

Leclaire had a deal of respect for the adopted comrade who had shown in full measure what he could do in a pinch.

"More power to the prediction," broke in Henri, "for many reasons, including the special one of putting us back regularly in the old trade. That's just what our good standby proposes to do as soon as he hits this spot."

Prediction that Antony would baffle his pursuers in the hills had verification by the appearance of that astute person in the mountain resort of the Roumanian band before the red of sunrise had blended with the gray of the slow advancing dawn.

At the time of this arrival the aviators were still in the land of nod, and it was broad daylight before they saw their tried and true comrade, in the act then of making his way up the footpath to the rock-bound chamber wherein the airmen had passed the night.

"Top of the morning to you, signor," called Henri, greeting the welcome presence of the scout.

The latter evidently guessed that the boy's salutation conveyed a lot of good will, for it commanded the fourth smile of a week from the tall chief.

"Threw 'em all down, didn't you, boss?" Billy's cheerful acclaim fell a little short of understanding on the part of the honored individual, but Gregoire signified appreciation of the glad effort by warmly shaking hands with the sturdy youngster.

While the reunited five were at breakfast in one of the larger caverns devoted to cookery, the meal had accompaniment outside of a roaring serenade from the wind, which for an hour or more had been constantly gaining in force and volume, and in every blast the chill hint of falling temperature.

By noon there was a heavy precipitation of snow on the mountain peaks, and no sign of let-up in the boisterous weather conditions.

"I see we're going to be hitched here for a while longer," lamented Pentonville, "and nobody can tell how long."

"What do you think of it?" queried Henri, speak-

ing to Antony, who sat, silent and somber, gazing into the glowing depths of an up-leaping blaze which had been kindled in the huge rock fireplace at the far end of the cavern. "I mean the storm, signor," explained the boy.

"Soon come, soon go, mayhap," was the best answer that could be made to the anxious inquiry. At any rate, it was the only one given by the Roumanian.

Failing to elicit any definite weather forecast from Gregoire, the attention of the aviators was diverted to another native son on the opposite side of the fireplace, representative of the old saying, "make hay while the sun shines," reconverted to fit the occasion, "keep busy while the storm blows." This cross-legged individual had a lap-full of peltry, a lengthy needle, of darning size, threaded with "fiddle string," and he was sewing like a piece-work tailor on sections of furred animal skins carved, with the aid of a keen-bladed knife, from the whole hide.

That which had once covered the flesh and bones of one of the rarest four-footers, a silver fox, now formed shapes of conical headgear, a style quite in vogue among the company which the aviators had of late been cultivating. To overcoat designs, bear, deer and wolves had evidently all contributed.

"Constantine is on the job," whispered Billy to

his flying partner. "You remember what his nobs said yesterday when he tipped that bundle into the plane?"

Henri "remembered" all right, and was all the more interested in the worker since reminded of what Antony had said.

"If those outfits are for us," remarked the lad in guarded tones, "we'll beat the zoo on a Sunday afternoon."

Pentonville had picked acquaintance—a talkless one, to be sure,—with the possessor of an accordion and a tenor voice that would have held its own in opera, to which combination the big Briton added, by sign solicitation, the services of the previously discovered violinist. The self-created concert manager soon had the melody going in fine style, and his exaggerated performance as director for the moment mirthfully illumined the faces of the mountain men, which in the silences were set and seamed with lines of sadness.

"Nothing fierce nor harsh about that bunch now," observed Billy, slipping a hand within the arm of his chum, and drawing nearer to the impromptu entertainment.

It was an evening of strange experience which the boys would not soon forget.

The succeeding morning was clear, cold and still. The white carpet on the mountain paths lay crisp beneath the many iron-shod boots that traversed it

in the various activities of the day. When the boys sought the Roumanian leader they found him in the same reflective mood, and in practically the same position before the fireplace as when they left him during the previous night.

"A fine winter day, signor," was Henri's feeler to start conversation.

If Antony agreed with this weather view, he did not so commit himself. Instead, he abruptly questioned: "With these airships of yours is there any measure of distance without return to ground?"

"With plenty of 'gas' and barring accidents, signor," replied young Trouville, "the measure you mention depends largely upon the endurance of the operators."

"Three hundred miles, as the crow flies, would not, then, drag you down in the passing?"

"Not on your life, signor," declared the boy; "we doubled that little bit in less than a day since coming to your country."

"But the way, the trackless way; how may you follow it?"

"By the compass, signor," said Henri. "Give us the direction, and we'll get there if the machinery holds out."

Gregoire turned to his lieutenant, who, with folded arms, stood listening nearby.

"The other two; bring them here," directed the chief.

Pentonville and Leclaire entered the cavern with time to spare from five minutes.

"What's up?" demanded the first-named veteran.

"A couple of flying machines will be shortly," volunteered Billy, "or I'm very much mistaken."

CHAPTER XI

IN THE LIMELIGHT AT JASSY

MUFFLED up to the ears in furs, with fox-skin caps completing the connection from the head-end down, the aviators, preparatory to flight, bore close resemblance to Eskimos on a seal hunt. They had been strictly enjoined by Gregoire to hold course to the limit over the mountain ranges, for, as the old scout expressed it, "every door in the southland is held by the enemy." To combat the frigid altitude or to protect in case of enforced descent to icy slope or snow-shrouded plateau, the wise one had provided his flying friends each with covering sufficient to keep Jack Frost at bay.

It had been decided that the elder airmen should navigate the "borrowed" airship, and also carry the coin therein, while the boys would run light in their own much smaller machine.

"You fellows are the scrappers of this corporation," Billy said to Pentonville, "and so will fit very nicely into that floating fort. We'll stay in

front until a shindy threatens," laughed the lad, "and then give you a chance to uphold the honor of the fighting flotilla."

"Go to the Bay of Biscay with your blarney," was the return banter of the Briton. "It's your duty to guard the 'bank' at all hazard."

With a long sweep of the Transylvanian Alps and a good bit of the Carpathians before them, the air drivers began to realize that it was timely for them to be up and at the sailing contract while the wind and the weather were so well behaving.

Not one among them but felt the wrench of parting with Antony, who had proved every inch a man and every instant the real thing as a "guide, philosopher, and friend."

It was a sentiment, however, with no outward display, save a handshake all around, over in a minute, and the flying machines lifted from the level immediately thereafter.

Their fixed destination was Jassy, the new capital of Roumania.

The earlier course was directly east and easily followed, with the mountain peaks below serving as guide-posts.

It was not until the northward turn into the wooded Carpathian region, and near the Moldavian frontier, that once again the aviators heard, faintly as yet, the tremendous thumping of big guns, indicating that the gruelling process of ceaseless war-

fare had a revolving center hereabouts, and also the making of another determined stand by the Russian-Roumanian troops, of late beaten from pillar to post, but ever fiercely resisting further encroachment of the enemy.

The driving mechanism of the aircraft was working smoothly, and though several times the "flying whale" had been inclined to cut capers, the skilled operation by Leclaire kept the big cruiser going without reduction of speed. Pilot Barry had had no trouble at all in the 150 miles already covered by the aeroplane he was steering.

As the travel north progressed, so grew the assurance of the birdmen that if grounding became necessary it would be in that part of the Roumanian province of Moldavia still known as safe territory, and encouraging the project of making now a direct dash across country to Jassy.

With the delivery of the treasure accomplished, it was the intent, as before stated, of the airmen, and eager anticipation, to get in touch with the Demonet squadron as quickly as the machines could be pushed through atmosphere. The location of the famous flotilla, if changed since Henri heard of it in the Teuton telegraph report at Turnu Severin, would not be difficult to ascertain at the new government headquarters.

Only the responsibility of the cash cargo prevented an immediate yielding by the flying four to

the stirring call of battle service, coming from the southeast in the sullen roar of cannon.

About fifty miles from Jassy, young Trouville found that there were a couple of dots on the lenses of the binocle he was aiming ahead of the aeroplane onrush.

The little black marks, reflected from the eastern sky, Henri soon had reason to declare were flying machines, and shaping larger and larger in rapid approach.

By arm signal the discovery was made known to the occupants of the larger craft, sailing at the time some little distance behind the boys' biplane. Pentonville instantly made ready the machine gun in the airship, and as promptly his companion applied extra power in forging to the front.

Billy, however, did not propose to do any dodging, and also spurted, keeping pace with the "flying whale" as it whirred forward to take issue with the oncoming warplanes.

Before a clash could be counted imminent, though, young Trouville had risen from his perch, shouting and with frantic gesture to the gunner in the armored cruiser, swiftly running alongside, to hold fire.

The boy saw now, by the magnifying power of the field glasses glued to his eyes, that the coloring of the opposing craft proclaimed them of the Russian service, and the thing to do was to immediately ap-

prize the stranger crews that the meeting was that of friends.

A showing of some sort would be of particular necessity in the case of the nondescript vessel in which Pentonville and Leclaire were riding, and which completely dwarfed the lighter machine in driving, head on, at the Muscovite outfit.

It occurred in a flash to Henri that there was a union-jack (British flag) in the locker of the aeroplane, and in a jiffy he yanked the colors out of the receptacle, yelling to Billy to "cut loose."

The Bangor boy responded by "hitting the pace" so hard that the aeroplane took a lead of fifty yards over its monster companion craft, giving the color bearer, upstanding and clinging to the rigging, a free sweep with the identifying flag.

So was saved an exchange of gunnery, and instead a combined descent for conference and better acquaintance. After 270 miles of steady going, the flying four rested now on the west bank of the Sereth river, with Jassy distant only a half-hour ride, aeroplane time.

Two of the Russian airmen, leaving their warplanes, were now advancing to give the waiting quartette the "once over." It was plain to be seen that the pair were not wholly devoid of suspicion, for never an instant did their right hands stray from the revolver grips protruding from the holsters at their hips, and their comrades who remained with

the machines nearby nursed short rifles in convenient position.

Billy, who had removed his fur cap, rather uncomfortable to him by reason of warmer temperature since leaving the mountains, was the first among the four to step forward to extend greeting to the approaching couple.

The Bangor boy had mentally framed a speech which, it happened, got lost somewhere inside of his lips. A single close look at the envoys to parley and the lad was tongue-tied.

It was one of the Muscovites who relieved the situation by a sudden reach for the shoulders of the lad, accompanied by a high note of recognition which gave every onlooker, except Henri, a start of surprise. Young Trouville had just set eyes on the faces of the Russian pair to whom his chum had intended speaking.

Almost as an echo of the glad cry from the shoulder-grabbing enthusiast was the hurrah effort of the second twin to catch a revelation.

"Salisky! And Marovitch, too, or I'm a sinner!"

The exclamation of his pal was the diversion needed to pull Billy out of the dumb ward, and directly the talkfest had attained the vocal proportions of an afternoon tea.

In the twentieth breathing spell it came to pass that Leclaire and Pentonville were favored with an

introduction to the newcomers, and from the latter learned over again that "these lads are the salt of the earth in two good packages."

"Said farewell to them in Petrograd once upon a time," explained Salisky, "as an end, we supposed, of the brave old days we passed together, and here by freak of fate does this meeting gladden our hearts."

Of the mentioned "brave old days" there is an account in a previous volume of this series, "Our Young Aeroplane Scouts in Russia."

Seeking light as to the latest developments in the campaign along the Sereth, the flying four received a lot of information from the Russians which was not encouraging for the allies' cause, though the backbone of the defense of what remained of unscathed Roumanian territory in the north was still upstanding and stubbornly stiff. Braila, however, had just been taken by the Teutons and Galatz seriously menaced. At the mention of the last-named city, Billy promptly manifested special interest.

"That's the town," he exclaimed, "where Demonet and our crowd are hanging out!"

"Our billet, too," cried Salisky, "and we can make it one party."

"But," interposed Henri, "there's a matter of important business that our bunch must first attend to in Jassy."

"Only a little way," put in Marovitch. "We will

convoy you in, and if you will make quick work of the business, the delay will work no great damage to us. We were ahead of orders out of Kief. Besides"—the speaker had a twinkle in his eye, as he pointed to the "flying whale"—"there may be need of additional evidence to prove that the queer-shaped thing over there is not an infernal machine."

"Just what it is," declared Pentonville, "for it put one perfectly good English aeroplane that I know of into the boneyard, and how many more likely flyers got the tumble from this contraption is a big guess."

"Reverse the order, my friend," advised Salisky, "now that you have got the battering-ram on your side."

"That's the chance for which we're looking," grimly intimated the big Briton.

The aviators, now eight in number, were soon moving at a lively clip toward Jassy, and in about thirty-five minutes sighted the large commercial city, where four of the airmen would find relief as custodians of a goodly fund recovered, in hazardous manner, from its hiding place in a faraway border town.

When the flying machines alighted, among the first of those who surrounded the new arrivals to inspect and call for a show-down of credentials, the young scouts immediately recognized one of

the prominent officials they had several times met in Bucharest, before the fall of that stronghold.

This recognition proved mutual, and our boys, after a word in the ear of this person of power, had all the "elbow room" they desired as guests of honor, which privilege and consideration was reflected upon the associates of the aerial twins.

After the treasure had been removed from the interior of the big aircraft, attracting, by the way, considerable attention as a remarkable exhibit, and transferred to the government depository, Billy and Henri received special invitation—mandate, in fact —to call upon the minister of finance of the Roumanian cabinet.

The lads insisted that Pentonville and Leclaire be included in the bid, thinking that their official acquaintance had probably vested in themselves all the credit forthcoming, through lack of knowledge of the participation of the others.

It developed, however, that it had been Demonet, the flotilla chief, himself, who had told in the former capital of permitting his boy recruits to volunteer for a venture which had no promise of being aught but a forlorn hope, and already depriving the squadron of two of its most efficient members.

Did the boy aviators permit the comrades of the Wallachian adventure to continue in the list of "missing" when official recognition of splendid service was involved? Indeed, they did not.

The pair of veterans had all and more than they wanted as their share of the limelight before the flight to Galatz and another mix-up in fighting affairs.

CHAPTER XII

AGAIN WITH THE SQUADRON

When the aviators left Jassy in the early morning of the day following their descent in that city, they had reason to anticipate decidedly torrid conditions prevailing in the region over which they must pass in their 120-mile drive south to Galatz. Wired word had come up in the night of the loss of Fokchani, the von Mackensen forces breaking through the strongly defended barrier which the Russians had constructed at that fortress position, and which Salisky, who well knew the imperiling consequence of this capture, declared was a "body blow."

As the flight swiftly proceeded, every expectation of striking into a powder tempest was realized in full measure by the blazing and banging in progress on dominating height or in river valley. The airmen sailed at quite an elevation, in order that if their progress happened to be disputed by hostile warplanes, the latter would not be given the over-riding advantage at the very start of interference.

Leclaire and Pentonville, however, had declared

that, flying high or low, they were confident of cutting clean in two, with a single rush of their mighty cruiser, anything on wings which obstructed the aerial way, and repeating the dose as often as there was new material upon which to operate.

The veterans were not given to boasting, as a rule, but the battering-ram now in their charge had become to them the most effective engine of war known in their long experience as expert aerialists —the pride of possession, no doubt, largely augmenting such belief.

But all the fighting chances seemed then to be tied fast to the ground, and not until the incoming machines crossed above the first of the three lines of fortifications defending Galatz did they encounter any semblance of their kind in the upper reaches.

Here, though, in a brace of minutes, quite a flock of aeroplanes suddenly bounced into the air and aggressively closed in upon the intruders.

So close, indeed, was the sweep of the leading warplane to the craft piloted by Billy that recognition was possible, one of the other, between the aviators.

Henri, a conspicuous figure on the observer's perch, and the man in similar position in the other machine, were exchanging high-signs before the cruisers had more than measured their lengths in passing. They also traded yells, but these were drowned by motor noise.

"Martigne on the back seat, Buddy!" Young Trouville leaned over to give the other twin the full benefit of both voice and name.

If Billy himself had caught a glimpse of their flotilla comrade, he did not risk a turn of the head to say so, for his eyes were occupied with the particular task of getting to earth within the limits of a plaza where he had noted the presence of aeroplane hangars.

A friendly understanding evidently having been established among the other air drivers, by show of colors on the part of the Russians, or otherwise, the landing of all the crews quickly followed in the trail of the young scouts.

The latter were in the grip of Chief Aviator Demonet the minute they leaped from the settled aeroplane, and even more astonished was the leader when the occupants of the "flying whale" crawled out of its depths for inspection—the long lost and supposedly done for Leclaire and Pentonville.

"Somewhat late for your Christmas gifts, boss," gaily declared the Bangor boy, "but it's something to bring them in without damage—all on account, sir, of careful caging."

"Stow that prattle, sonny," admonished the big Briton, wearing in addition to the furs that made him look for all the world like a giant bruin, a grin which cut his face from ear to ear.

Now surrounded by other members of the squad-

ron, Lascelles, Martigne, Logan, Cantrell and the rest, a full dozen or more, the returned comrades were put through a query grilling that elicited finally about the whole story of their adventures in company with the Roumanian sage of the hills.

Demonet, when he heard the details of the recovery of the treasure and of its safe delivery in Jassy, warmly congratulated the participants upon the achievement, and in addition earnestly asserted that "one day, if I live to present the record, honor will be accorded where honor is due."

Galatz, at the time headquarters of the Demonet squadron, had been counted, up to the period of its becoming a fighting center, Roumania's largest and most important commercial city, situated on the Danube, the chief lumber port of the kingdom and ranking second to the recently captured Braila in grain shipments. In addition to location on the Danube the city stands between two great tributary arteries of traffic, the Sereth and the Pruth.

Where our aviators had landed was in the new section of the great Danube port, taking the form of an amphitheater spread out upon an elevation some distance north of the river, most of the residences here, while the "old town" occupies the low ground between the cliff and the water front, and containing the flour and paste mills, the grain elevators and immense grain magazines.

As Billy and Henri, however, first viewed the

triple lines of fortifications from aloft they had no other impression than that they were flying into an entrenched camp, and, further, convinced that the chief business now round about was war—transacted at the muzzles of Krupp and Gruson guns set up along the Sereth for many miles.

By order of Demonet, the young scouts were compelled to "take it easy" for the succeeding three days, and in company with Pentonville and Leclaire, also declared off duty, mingled with Roumanians, Greeks, Russians, Armenians, Jews and the recently emancipated Tsiganes (gypsies) in the great bazaar of Galatz, also viewing, to the tourist the most interesting building in the Danube city, the Church of St. Mary's, which contains the tomb of the celebrated Cossack chief, Mazeppa.

The flying quartette were just about ready to start a strike against the rest assignment when they received summons, on the morning of the fourth day, to report for duty at the hangar plaza, where they found the chief in conference with Logan, the fireball specialist, and Cantrell, the crack gunner of the aerial corps. Salisky and Marovitch were also in the group as listeners, along with Tillon, Demonet's pilot.

"There's some heavy pressure in the forming southeast of this position," the aviation leader was stating when the young scouts arrived in hearing distance, "and if it gets near enough to the push

that is working from the west, look out for a squeeze that will grind us out of possession here, cut Roumania off entirely from the Black Sea and tie up all movement on the Danube as tight as a drum. A look into Dobrudja is of immediate necessity, if the expected blow is to be properly anticipated. That is the charge upon us now, at this hour—and with myself nine will serve in this reconnoiter. I see them all here."

Four regulation warplanes and the "thunder-pumper," the now generally adopted title for the odd airship driven by Leclaire, carried the party away from Galatz at 9 a.m., by Billy's watch, and widely separating as they flew, for the purpose of broadening the scope of inspection to the limit.

The young scouts followed a course at the extreme left of that pursued by the other planes—to be exact, most remote from the starting point. For that reason, or as chance would have it, the lads had the first glimpse of a large body of troops encamped on the plain, and beyond, in dimmer distance, the misty outline of the sea border.

Henri sized up the resting brigade through his field glasses, saw that a heavy weight of artillery was in transport, that the force represented the central powers, and only one thing left to conjecture—which way would the march trend when the army got ready to move.

The observer conceived the idea that the better

plan would be to wait on the ground for such ascertainment, as to hang around overhead would be only to invite a counter-move on the part of some hostile aircraft, if there be any of the kind in the vicinity.

When the tip was passed to Billy in a way that he could not help hearing, the pilot started a slant which brought the machine to its wheels in a sandy spot not far from a swamp-draining ditch which had gone dry as a bone.

As the descent was in progress, young Trouville trained the binocle he held in all directions in visual search for the balance of the flying company, marking down, or, rather, up, two at least of the companion cruisers, perhaps several miles further south.

The next flying machine that the boy saw in the air—in fact, both of the lads looking this time—was not in charge of any Demonet man, for it had lifted directly above the enemy encampment a mile distant, and speedily multiplied into a buzzing collection of a half-dozen more of the same kind.

After describing part of a circle, the initially showing aeroplane drew straight to a line that indicated a near passage over the ground where the lads had landed.

Billy, in a spasm of quick thinking, looked first at the ditch as a place of concealment for their machine and themselves, but depth and steep incline assured a wreck of the plane, and so, with about

three minutes to spare, the Bangor boy made one leap into the cruiser, shouting to Henri to "shove and get aboard!"

If the onrushing warplanes, all in one line of travel, had not slightly changed their route at the last minute, swerving a hundred yards or so to the west, and also working upward at a rapid rate, the young scouts would have been blocked in their attempt to even get a rise and balance for flight.

As it was, the only advantage the lads could claim vested solely in the fact that the passing planes had not scattered, and by this means wholly encompassed the craft operators seeking avenue of escape. With the enemy machines now wheeling about for return stroke at the cruiser which had so suddenly bounced into the air, and now to the rear, Billy accepted the one and only opportunity to baffle the easy picking which the hostile flyers no doubt confidently expected—a dash on the back-track, involving flight directly over the area occupied by the army encampment.

The necessity of straightway speed to hold the little distance afforded the boys in lead of their pursuers, precluded any attempt by the young pilot to climb high enough to insure against the danger of a crippling shot from below, even if the airmen in chase proved short themselves in marksmanship.

But it was a touch and go chance, at best, which

the boys had taken, and no time now to consider. All of the machines coming in a bunch, the upgazing soldiers at first failed to realize that there was a strange bird in the flock, and the young scouts were half way across the tented field before the put-putting of machine guns in one of the warplanes at the rear started the rattle of rifle fire underneath.

The Bangor boy, driving at the rate of about a mile and a half a minute, found doubled satisfaction in his pal's one-two shout—"they never touched us," and "we've got 'em tied to a post now!" The last ringing reference was to the warplanes behind, plainly and rapidly losing ground in the race.

"That's the beauty of not being cluttered up with a lot of iron," the pilot was saying to himself, when again assured by his chum that the gap between pursuers and pursued continued to widen, and directly the most pleasing word to "take it a bit easy now, Buddy, and save the gas."

So great had been the velocity attained by the racing cruiser in the getaway performance, that before another mile was covered some overheated part of the aeroplane mechanism, even at lessened speed, shrilled a protest against further progress without lubricating attention. Billy had a finely tuned ear for that sort of thing, and forthwith volplaned into a sea of high waving grass, covering an extensive stretch of country.

"Here's a dandy place for a lay-down," declared

Henri, taking a preliminary roll to illustrate the promise of comfortable siesta.

"Lay first, sonny, on the job of fixing this machine," requested the other twin, tramping down the herbage to clear working space.

The task completed, the boys took the precaution of grassing over the full length of the craft, that it might be effectually hidden from view in the event that the unfriendly airmen, lately distanced, should renew search for the elusive speeder.

With knapsacks in their laps and softly seated, the young scouts sought cure for hunger and cramped limbs.

"Here we'll wait awhile," mumbled Billy, with a mouthful of sandwich, "for the rest of the gang to show up."

CHAPTER XIII

MENACE MET WITH FIRE

THE boys had been lolling in the grasslands for perhaps an hour when they were aroused from day-dreaming by the faint whir of aeroplane machinery, growing louder as they listened, and the sound source revealed to Henri with the pointing of his field glasses southward. As the craft came buzzing over the plain, the lad with the binocle could see that something had gone wrong with the approaching cruiser, its course most erratic and labored, with a sidewise sag and getting closer and closer to the surface of the earth, despite the apparent efforts of the navigator to keep up as long as possible.

Billy, also taking a peep at the wobbling war-plane through magnifying lenses, was the first to make declaration that the disabled airboat "looked like one of our kind"—immediately and positively adding the expressed certainty that "it is one of our machines."

Mutually satisfied on this point, the young scouts

hunted a bit of higher ground, not far distant, fired a round each from their revolvers and hoisting young Trouville's only white handkerchief on a steel rod, withdrawn for the purpose from the aeroplane rigging.

Before the men in the disabled cruiser could give responsive signal they—the whole outfit—were down on the ground and for the moment lost to sight, owing to intervening tall growth and the earth depression into which the craft had gone when it fell.

The flying twins lived up to their title by the manner in which they hustled over the space that separated them from the scene of aeroplane disappearance, a distance of two hundred yards, and the first man in view at the finish of the quickstepping was Logan, nursing a bandaged hand, while a little further along, Cantrell could be seen, in the act of hastily reloading the magazine of a repeating rifle.

As the fire-ball specialist caught sight of the youths in near appearance above the herbage he turned quickly to the master gunner standing by the damaged machine, with laconic advice to "stow the shooting-iron," and then, laughingly addressing the boys, "so you're the fellows who wasted ammunition when we came down—got a glimpse of the rag just before our bump, but that's all, outside of the shooting."

"What's happened to your fin?" anxiously inquired the Bangor boy.

"Got nicked by a bit of lead as we went by the army back there," replied Logan; "a mere scratch, though, my lad, and not a marker to the dose they gave the plane."

"To say nothing of what occurred to a couple of gentlemen who gave us the bad half-minute." This verbal wedge by Cantrell, patting the trusty weapon as he propped it against the rigging of the warplane.

"Didn't see anything of a swarm of hornets upstairs, did you?" Henri asked.

"Yes," stated Logan, "but mighty small spots at the distance we observed them."

One more query from Billy: "Where's the rest of the push?"

"Still working south, I guess," advised Cantrell. "Demonet started us back with the news already picked up. Guess he thought you, too, had found a bone and were running home with it."

Logan had now devoted himself to serious contemplation of the inert cruiser, indulging comment in effect that "this is a 'pretty kettle of fish,' stuck out here with a sieve on our hands."

"Don't forget, old man," said the Bangor boy, wearing an air of gay assurance, "that there's a couple of factory workers in the crowd who know

something about the rejuvenation of junk. Let's see, Henri, if we can't patch up this wreck."

The boys went back to their own craft for tools and spare parts, which they had long made a habit of carrying for just such emergencies, and which custom had served them well on many occasions of stranded peril and pinch.

It was a tough job, though, with which the experts were now confronted, and, notwithstanding the skill and rapid manipulation employed, it was nearly night before it could be reasonably predicted that the badly bunged up aeroplane would stay in the air long enough to cover the remaining forty miles to Galatz.

"Well," remarked Billy, as he resumed his outer garments, discarded while the boy had been at labor, "if we expect to get anywhere before darkness falls down on us, there's no time like the present to hit the trail."

"Right you are, Buddy," agreed the other twin; "and it may happen," he continued, "that our friends here will have to go a bit slower than usual on account of a bum motor. So the quicker the start, the better all around."

"Willing enough, as far as we're concerned," declared Logan, "and it's a sure thing that our tidings to the town will wake 'em up."

"And eat 'em up," added Cantrell, "if the Russians don't cross the track in time to-morrow."

In the long twilight that ensued the aviators were enabled to hold with tolerable accuracy the course northwest that would lead them to the Danube port for which they were headed. As Henri had been inclined to anticipate, the hastily repaired machine carrying Logan and Cantrell was draggy of motion, though bidding fair at the outset to win through. It was getting quite dark when the aeroplanes essayed the crossing of the Danube, eight or nine miles from Galatz, and as it was the purpose of the airmen to land in the newer section of the town, where was located the flotilla hangars, the pilots continued slightly beyond the line direct into the old city from the east.

Misfortune bobbed up along about the time the cruisers were edging aloft the region between Galatz and the Pruth river, a forbidding swamp or mere, covering in all some fifty square miles and spiked with gigantic reeds, which, gathered by the peasants, are extensively used for fuel. Here it was that the Logan-Cantrell machine developed all the symptoms of reopened wounds in its structure, sufficient warning to the pilot to instantly seek a solid foundation.

While the soil below was not particularly firm, it presented the saving assurance that once on top of it, the eccentric craft could not fall any further. Billy and Henri, without hesitation, and as a mat-

ter of course, immediately duplicated the descent of their companions in distress.

All about the landing place now the darkness was absolute, until Henri set the aeroplane forelights aglow in the dismal surroundings.

Then reiteration by Logan—"this is a pretty 'kettle of fish!' "

The illumination of the few feet of space occupied by the flying machines proved of triple effect, but yet of contrary results—in the first instance, dispelling in a cheering degree the shrouding gloom, and at the same time serving to both attract and repel unknown denizens of the reed maze.

Discordant squawking, squealing, and, most disturbing and startling, a fierce and varied chorus of snorts, snarls, grunts and gnashing of teeth, a horror of sound behind the impenetrable curtain of the blackest kind of night.

"Old Nick and his imps!" The exclamation from Cantrell, reaching for his rifle.

"Wild swine, more likely," broke in Henri, who only two days previous had heard of savage attacks on fuel-gatherers by the long-snouted, ferocious beasts infesting the lowlands of the Pruth, a river held in aversion by all Roumanians, who believe that many of the calamities to which the flesh is heir have come from beyond this waterway—cholera, war and famine.

"We're in for a howl of a night," was Billy's ob-

servation. "Give us a little more light, sonny"—this request made of the other twin.

Ping! The whip-like crack emanated from the repeater in the hands of Cantrell, succeeded by an unearthly guttural, gasping noise and a great rustling in the swamp growth.

"One pig the less," grimly remarked the gunner. "Get your guns, fellows, and be sports while the game lasts."

With the suggestion there was prompt compliance, the other three scouts diving into the aeroplanes after shooting-irons, of which there were sufficient to provide all with rifles, and each carried a heavy-service revolver in hip holster.

"Not going to sit like 'bumps on a log,' after all," remarked the Bangor boy, keeping sharp watch on the fringe of the marsh touched by the light rays.

Blood having been spilled, and the odor scented afar by nostrils acutely smelling, the swamp produced an augmented mixture of noises, at once menacing and terrifying.

From the knapsack strapped across his shoulders Logan extracted a piece of wrapping paper, which had contained a hunk of cheese and a round of bologna, made a ball of the greasy fabric, touched it with a spluttering match, and by the force of a practiced arm-swing sent the flaming spheroid hurtling into the fen.

The veteran aerial bomb artist, believing that the enraged beasts were about to overrun the only place of refuge offered to the party, was inspired to this final act of defense by the gusty pressure of a rising wind at his back. Anticipating the probable effect of the blazing missile among the inflammable sun-dried stalks at the edge of the lowland area, it would not have been launched were the air currents in reverse. As well, then, to have made the other choice of depending upon the rifles as a check to the porcine rush.

Not until the first uplifting flash of expanding flame that, wind-fanned, swept away in wide and fiery trail, did the rest of the little company comprehend fully the intent and accomplishment of their comrade's design. The animals, lately bent on tearing to bits the invaders of their feeding ground, were put to panicky paces to save their own hides, flesh and bones. Between the beasts and the prey they sought was now a large blazing barrier of flames.

"Some top-knot on your neck, old man," cried Billy, grasping the uninjured throwing hand of the steel-nerved and quietly composed Logan, "and I'll bet you singed some bristles with that inshoot of yours."

"It is just as well, while you're talking, to put in an additional vote of thanks for the free bit of breathing space that we have here. Take it from me

there's a lot of smoke around that we can't see, but it's a lung filler, all right."

Cantrell had a fit of coughing to prove his contention.

"Now," said Henri, "we have coming to us, I think, an hour apiece for sleep before daylight. How does that fit with your alarm clock, Buddy?"

Billy advised his chum that he was a "pretty fair guesser," for it was about five hours before dawn could be expected.

"Then," continued young Trouville, "as the proposer, I'll take the first watch, though I don't know exactly what to look for, since the pigs have all vamosed."

Cantrell was the next one to act as sentinel, and in turn, Logan, with the Bangor boy last on the list.

Greeting the new day, it happened, was not the only experience that fell to the lot of guard number four.

Just about the time when earliest morning made preliminary showing of its advent, and Billy was exercising all the will power he had to keep his eyes open, the boy had an arousing which, in the measure of a finger tap, set him upright and wide awake.

An unusually short man, with an exceptionally long rifle over his shoulder, and leading a most woe-

begone mule, suddenly appeared in the little clearing, coming out of the close-growing weeds on the side which the fire had not touched in its before-the-wind sweep of the past night. The queer outfit halted within twenty feet of the sleepy sentinel before the latter had his shake-up by catching sight of the wholly unexpected visitors, whose approach had been without noticeable sound.

Which of the two was most astonished at the discovery, one of the other—the dwarf-like pilot of the mule or the young pilot of aeroplanes—would be difficult to decide.

Billy, however, was the first to recover mental poise, and with the feel of his revolver grip in rear-shifted hand, he moved forward to challenge or question the squat intruder.

On second thought, though, the lad relinquished combative idea and attitude, for the nondescript stranger made no attempt to lower the gun from his shoulder or do otherwise than show his teeth in an extensive grin.

"Where away, signor?"

The young airman put the query in the best Romani that he knew.

A shake of the head indicated lack of understanding on the part of the hairy person addressed.

Billy tried the question then in the Russ language, and it hit the mark.

"To Bessarabia I belong, little brother," was the answer.

"And I'm sized small by this hop-o'-my-thumb," sighed the Bangor boy to himself. Then aloud in the Muscovite tongue: "Come along, my friend, we may have use for that mule."

CHAPTER XIV

IN SEARCH OF THEIR CHIEF

"Hi there, sleepy heads!" Billy's loudly voiced summons he accompanied with an imitation of a bugle call, making use of a thumb and finger combination as a mouthpiece, and especially favored Henri with a drumming on the back.

"Behold," continued the active camp crier, when he had a rather surly audience in sitting posture, "a relief expedition has arrived and awaits your pleasure."

The indignant protest of the trio, whose dreams had been so rudely fractured, was withdrawn in the first intake of breath after the little man and the mule proved reality by coming closer at the beckoning bid of the Bangor boy.

"There's power for your busted boat," was the next sally of the facetious youth, directed at Logan, and illustrated by a nod towards the long-eared quadruped, nosing over the shoulder of the diminutive master.

"Two of you at once is a surplus," was the smiling come-back of the fire-ball artist, "but with only one braying I guess we can stand it."

"Now will you be good?" piped Henri to his chum.

Cantrell at the moment created a diversion which lifted all eyes from the swamp glade. Something other than Billy's badinage had reached the ear of the mentioned veteran, and proclaimed by his quickly spoken admonition to "hush that gab—aeroplane headed this way."

Sure enough, a persistent humming heralded the approach of a winged cruiser, even now shaped and gilded in the spreading beams of a glorious sunrise.

Henri, blinking through the glasses he had instantly brought into play, soon was able to volunteer the information that the craft overhead was not of the color and make which served the enemy. "Besides," asserted the binocle wielder, "it's driving direct for Galatz, as I figure it, and not likely a raider, traveling, as you see, alone."

"Say," excitedly added the boy, "they're pulling a telescope on us now!" The young scout had his handkerchief out and waving it in windmill circles.

"They're coming down!" he cried. "By George, it's Salisky in the rigging, and no mistake!"

When the hovering machine completed rapid de-

scent, six of the original starters in the reconnaissance were accounted for.

"What's anchored you here?" Marovitch had the question ready before he swung a leg out of the aeroplane.

"Machine out of commission," briefly replied Logan.

"We're laggards, too," admitted Salisky, "all on account of being blocked last evening by a regular cloud of planes. We gave them the slip in the dark, but went to ground cover soon after because our lights would not work All's well, anyhow; the Germans won't get to Galatz this week, if ever."

In the meantime, Billy and Henri had been tinkering again with the refractory cruiser, finally concluding that it was a shop job, the means of mending at their command not adequate to practically reconstruct a portion of the driving machinery.

"There's some open ground, I believe, on the south side of this fen; we'll haul the cracked cruiser out there and give the mule a chance; it's only four or five miles to town, I guess, and it will do Logan and Cantrell good to walk it. They're getting too fat, anyway."

Young Trouville having amicably settled the question, at least to his own satisfaction, proceeded to present the plan to the others interested.

"'Hobson's choice,'" conceded Cantrell, "so

go ahead and sign the contract with the muleteer."

The Russian aviators had already struck up a speaking acquaintance with their countryman from the nearby province, and the three were exchanging tongue-twisters at 2:03 gait.

"He's from Bessarabia, as sure as the sun rises and sets," asserted Salisky, when the boys joined the trio. "The mule wears the proof," calling attention to the burrs that, like things alive, had made an inextricable tangle of the animal's shaggy coat, fore and aft, forming stiff, heavy mats out of mane and tail like an immovable board or club. "The like of those stickers," advised the Muscovite speaker, "are found nowhere else on earth than Bessarabia."

"They don't interfere with locomotion, do they?" asked Billy, much amused at the novel method of establishing residence.

"That old hoof-lifter there could pull a train of cars out of a ditch," assured Salisky, who knew the breed as well as the burrs attached.

When the owner of the remarkable beast had been separated from the important information that he knew a road which led directly to Galatz, and only a short distance to get into it, Billy expressed regret at lack of a medal to pin on the front of the dwarf's sheepskin overcoat.

With the starting of the curious cavalcade, the

remaining aviators resumed flight, which in a few minutes ended in descent upon the plaza, from which they had sailed some twenty-four hours previously.

Lascelles and Martigne had just returned from a flying trip, which had for its purpose the dropping of bombs on wooden bridges which the enemy were endeavoring to erect over soft spots in the river and lake region forming the northern border of Dobrudja. "The only reason we came back so soon," stated Martigue, "is that we ran out of bombs."

Noon arrived, then the hours one, two, and three, and no sign of the incoming of the missing four aviators engaged in the southern expedition. Logan, Cantrell, the Bessarabian, the mule and the disabled craft had arrived about 10 o'clock. The fire-ball expert and his gunner companion, having exhausted their vocabulary of expletives in relation to the corduroy avenue over which they had traveled, were now anxious consultants as to the cause of delay in the scheduled appearance of the aviation chief and the balance of the party.

"The understanding was," argued Cantrell, "that every member of our company, barring accident, would answer roll call here this morning. We had our share of mishaps, but managed to pull through, and it must have been a pretty severe jolt that prevented the chief from executing his own order."

"He was still driving south when we last saw his warplane," asserted Marovitch, "and the big air walloper was pumping close behind."

"Something's punched a hole in the time-table, that's sure," claimed Henri, who in the passing hours had hardly abandoned for a minute eager look-out with his field glasses.

An air scout, speeding in from the west later in the afternoon, carried dire advices, as a witness of the Teutonic taking of Vadeni, a railroad town within six miles of Galatz.

"We're hooked up for a hot time here before long," was Logan's comment when this news got in circulation.

"All the more need for Demonet," declared Billy, "and if he isn't on the job by next dawn, sonny and I are going to find out, if we can, just why,"

Within the city fortifications, the night was astir with defensive preparation, and the aviation squadron crews were as busy as the rest in getting the machines in perfect working shape. When Billy and Henri finally sought their blankets, it was with supreme confidence that their own cruiser had go enough in it for a continuous stretch of several hundred miles.

All of the bombsters and machine gun operators in the aerial flotilla were in requisition for the Sereth front, but as drivers of a courier craft our

young scouts were not yet drawn for fixed duty in the morning. In addition, the lads had been urging upon the aviation lieutenant, commanding in the absence of Demonet, the importance of getting word to the corps leader of the newer peril menacing Galatz, and that officer had partially agreed, in the event of the non-arrival at daybreak of the chief, to grant the flying twins permission to seek the strangely missing head of the airmen force.

This concession served to make easier the few hours of sleep which the boys felt that they ought to take in order to meet every demand of endurance on the morrow.

No need, however, for any rousing hand or peremptory summons to break the rest of Billy and Henri. They were watching on the plaza at the very first showing of daylight, after a still hunt for something to eat and a bit of food also to stow in their knapsacks.

Aviation Lieutenant Avery had prompt reminder of his provisional agreement of the past night, and making sure that Demonet had not come in with the dawn, bade the young scouts to "pull out," at the same time advising the youths to consider it "only leave for the day."

Big guns were booming along the Sereth, when the lads took their lift, and aimed the steel beak of the warplane toward the south, holding close this time to the border line of Wallachia and Dobrudja,

with intent of steering clear of the hostile encampment in the center of the last named province.

Accepting the statement of Salisky that the last seen of the chief was in a vicinity that could not have been far above the Bulgarian boundary, Pilot Billy took the chance of proceeding straightway to that section, Henri all through the downward run keeping sharp lookout with his binocle to guard against the possibility of passing without notice the comrade voyagers on the way back.

No other aircraft, however, made appearance, either going or coming, Billy and Henri for this hour at least were monarchs aloft of all they surveyed.

Having fully covered one hundred miles in given direction since leaving Galatz, the Bangor boy realized that there must be shifting of course or the warplane would directly be invading Bulgarian territory, an undesirable proposition, in the event of enforced landing, and surely of almost a certainty would prove no place to look for Demonet and his companions.

Crossing to the east, then, the guiding twin contemplated below a wide sweep of fertile plain, dotted here and there by tiny towns and villages, withal a picture of peaceful occupation and avocatioe, inhabited, the aviator knew, owing to location, by a friendly people.

With no idea of how extended would be their journeying this day, young Barry concluded to here seek for a little while relief from cramped position and steering strain. Perhaps, too, he thought, some native might remember seeing an odd-shaped airship like the "thunderpumper," so identifying the whole Demonet outfit, giving the direction pursued, and such additional other facts as might create a definite lead.

The cruiser hit the earth not far from a mud-and-wattle house, scared a cow into wild capering across the furrowed field, and brought the peasant proprietor of the place into the dooryard with a pitchfork presented in bayonet style.

Henri gave the smock-frocked farmer a cheery halloo in the liquid dialect.

The salutation served as a password, and brought the rest of the family out of hiding—"some family," as Billy remarked to his chum at sight of the "better half" and eight or nine youngsters, in various awkward stages of growth.

As the aviators worked for welcome by the diplomacy of a pleasant front, they soon had the entire household in touching distance, though every last one of the domestic treasures fought shy of the aeroplane, and could not be induced to get within twenty feet of the mechanical bird.

Billy took advantage of the cordial confidence now displayed by the peasants in asking the father

of the flock if he had noticed in the last day or two in that neighborhood any big flying thing that looked like a fish.

Before answering, the farmer crossed his forefingers as if to exorcise an evil memory.

"Such as that of which you tell, signor, has darkened the sky a very little time ago, even a day, I count it. My brother, this hour in Bosau town, and soon coming, may tell you of the great black bat when it spit fire and smoke and tore another buzzing thing to pieces."

"That relative of his nobs is the fellow we want to see," said Billy, by word aside to his chum, when the peasant had finished his statement with a shudder. Then directly addressing the perturbed farmer: "About when do you expect this brother of yours?"

"By the middle hour, with the good horse and the cart filled with meal bags," was the reply.

"Means 12 o'clock to-day, I guess," observed Henri. "What does the chronometer say to you now, pal?"

"Only nine-twenty," advised the Bangor boy. "The tip's worth waiting for, though, as it's the only mark on the trail to the present minute."

Young Trouville produced a pocket-mirror, used by him aloft to flash signals when the sun shone, intending to entertain the baby of the flock with a glimpse of its own chubby face.

If the lad had pointed a revolver at the infant the mother could not have displayed a greater degree of consternation or been more prompt in the protective measure of enfolding this offspring in her encircling arms.

"Rung the curtain on you, sonny," laughed the other twin. "Wonder why?"

The man of the house was instantly apologetic in explanation that if a child sees its image in a mirror before it is three years old, it will become a victim of "falling sickness," which will send it stumbling through life.

In whiling away the waiting time, and by adroit questioning, the boys learned that the Roumanian peasant is much given to superstition, having a sign for everything—if shingles are not nailed on the roof in the proper sign, they will turn up at the ends; if potatoes are not planted in the proper sign, they will grow on top of the soil and be a failure; if you have money in your pocket when you see the new moon, you will not "go broke," at least not until another new moon has come. On the other hand, it is held to be dangerous to announce to those in the house that the new moon has appeared, for in that case all the pots and pans in the kitchen will be broken before the waning moon passes.

Now occurred an interruption, with the relator still warming to the subject—the rumbling of a wagon in the long lane extending from the farm en-

closure to a public highway, and directly a shout of greeting to all of the children big enough to run and already scampering toward the gate.

"Traja!" announced the head of the establishment.

CHAPTER XV

AN INSPIRED DISCOVERY

"TRAJA" proved not nearly so talkative as his brother, and of brisk, shrewd manner, indicating that he had taken a step beyond the primitive ways of looking at things in general, so common to rural Roumania. But the young scouts found reason to approve the superior make-up of the newcomer, for they got the story they wanted without awesome trimmings.

Their new acquaintance, the lads learned, when he had assured himself that the aviators were serving with the allied defenders of Roumania, was engaged from time to time in securing cavalry mounts for the friendly forces, and the pursuance of such occupation, on the preceding day, took him some twenty miles southward from the scene of present conversation.

Near the town of Maldjilar, as the story went, the teller thereof had witnessed, from the shelter of a haystack, an aerial combat in which two machines

were apparently arrayed against five in opposition.

"One among them," continued Traja, "was, it looked to me, nearly half the size of that barn over there, and spouting red as it went through the air. Twice it struck a flying enemy, and of these two that were hit I saw no more. Then the smaller flying thing behind the big one came like the wind in front, and puffing little spots of white smoke. The buzzing shape in its way crumpled like a cow's horn and fell like a shooting star. What became of the two that remained on that side I cannot say, but I watched the long and short shapes that had fought together until they passed from sight, going toward Wallachia."

"You're the full steam as a reporter, signor," was Billy's complimentary observation, "and I've got the picture pat of that scrap. But, say, one more point, about where do you think our friends hit the border?"

"They must have crossed the big river near Silistria," replied Traja.

"And from that place," said Henri, searching his memory, "it is less than a 'century run' to Galatz. The planes must have struck another snag, as the boss could not have lost his way in that easy transit."

"There's only one way to find out, then, what brand of a 'snag' it was," promptly volunteered the

Bangor boy, "and that is to get a move on ourselves along the same route."

In the presence of an interested audience, which, however, maintained a respectful distance during the performance, the young pilot had the warplane up and going in a few minutes, taking the direction pointed out by Traja. Having now some definite assurance that the missing aviators had at least started for squadron headquarters, there was added zest to a hunt which had ceased to be simply an aimlessly wandering proposition.

Crossing the Danube, widely flowing between low banks, where the mighty river became the western boundary of Dobrudja, Billy violated all the rules of caution by running close to the Buzeu valley fighting ground where enemy artillery was yet massed and the one out of ten chances of attracting an air-shaking shell. But the boys believed that if Demonet had stopped anywhere of his own accord on the return voyage, it would be in vicinity where powder was being burned—and if otherwise stopped —dread thought to the flying twins—at any rate, the calamity was more likely of happening here than nearer to the less menacing border line which the young scouts had just quitted.

Nearing a Russian-Roumanian position on an elevation a mile north of the valley, Henri bent forward to suggest to his companion that they make landing behind these lines, in one more endeavor to

allay the foreboding which had about overshadowed any hope entertained by the boys of successfully tracing the comrades so earnestly sought.

With colors displayed, the flying twins descended not far from the field hospital, where, pitiful to view, there were many sufferers, some desperately wounded, cared for as best could be arranged—victims of a sanguinary repulse at a battle point nearby.

To a pair of burly Muscovites, passing with a stretcher, young Trouville immediately addressed himself, asking where the aviators of the division might be found.

One of the big fellows extended an index finger at the level beyond the canvas shelters. "There," he said, "are the flying men—all who have returned this day."

The other bearer of the litter added the remark that "in the tent you see yonder is one of the air soldiers with a shattered arm. You may see him as you pass."

On the way to the aviation station, the lads did pause, with kindly intent of speaking a word of good cheer to the member of their profession in distress.

The first look at the pale face of the patient on the cot, and Billy gasped in astonishment.

"By my soul"—a tremulous utterance by the boy —"it's Tillon!"

Tillon it was—Demonet's pilot!

By this time Henri was close beside the couch, words of sympathy trembling on his lips. "Hope it is not serious, old man," murmured the young scout, noting with anxious eye the swathed right arm bound to the side of the recumbent figure.

The gallant aeroplanist uncertainly replied: "The surgeon don't know whether I will lose it or not. Too long without doctor's attention, I believe."

"Where did it happen?" Billy's earnest inquiry.

"Air fight in Dobrudja," was the feeble response made.

"Five against two?" Henri recalled the story of Traja.

The patient nodded assent, with faint query of his own: "How did you know?"

Young Trouville told of the source of his knowledge, and also how "Buddy and I have been chasing you all over creation."

In return advices, the boys soon learned that Demonet had driven like mad after the mishap to his faithful lieutenant, in search of skilled treatment and antiseptic appliance, when the aviators had done all they could to check blood flow from the wound; how the chief and the drivers of the accompanying airships had swept across a flaming battle front to win this haven and aid for their stricken comrade, and how they had all sworn with soldier's oath "to see him through."

"Then the bunch are still clustered on this cliff?" The Bangor boy's final interrogation.

The answer "yes" was pictured in the eyes smilingly uplifted from the pillow.

An army surgeon parted the flaps of the tent. "Come out of there," he brusquely invited. "Do you want to kill the man?"

That being just what the lads did not want to do, they meekly decamped, with beaming backward looks at the brother aviator laid low for the time being.

Demonet, Leclaire and Pentonville—every last one of them—jointly, severally, and literally threw up their hands in unfeigned surprise when the flying twins hove in sight this late afternoon on the crowning spot of the Buzeu battle line.

"Poke me with a bayonet," fairly roared the stalwart Briton, "or am I still dreaming?"

The gravity of demeanor of the aviation leader slipped from him like a falling mantle, succeeding the outbreak of Pentonville, when the keen eyes of the chief alighted upon the forms of the oncoming youths.

With every tooth in his head delightedly showing, Demonet had both hands outstretched in greeting to the lads, of whom he was so proud and fond. "Is tumbling from the clouds your only accomplishment?" he laughingly inquired.

"Hardly, sir," modestly declared Billy; "our spe-

cialty, we claim, is restoring missing men to their proper port."

"Listen to that," vociferated Leclaire; "the bantam has spurs, believe me!"

It was up to the boys to turn loose a volume of straight talk, and they had it all out in no time, by relieving one another whenever their breath gave out.

"You think then, that this outfit is needed to save the day at Galatz?" quizzed Pentonville.

Demonet brushed aside this jocular query with a gesture of impatience. "We realize, my lads," he gravely stated, "that we should now be at the front where we belong, but in being tardy we have not been idle. Besides, Tillon has ransomed all of us with his blood, and mayhap, with his good right arm."

The big Englishman turned serious himself after this address to the brave young couriers, and huskily explained that though he acted like a clown sometimes it was only skin deep. "You're a pair of bully boys, and you know that I think it."

Billy pinched the elbow of the great-hearted veteran. "You're an open book, old man, and always tip-top reading."

The Bangor boy at this was compelled to endure a sounding slap on the back, administered by a hand sized like a small ham.

With the passing of another day, and the assur-

ance of one of the eminent surgeons in the medical corps that Tillon would "pull through" with only the possible adverse result of a permanently stiff arm, it was determined by the aviation leader to immediately attempt the forty-mile drive to Galatz, having the promise that the wounded comrade would be sent forward at the first opportunity.

An aviator by name of Cranshaw, who had lost his mate in a recent high clash at Zoitza, joined the little company as pilot for Demonet, and the three warplanes were presently sailing into another scene of violent encounter, raging between Braila and Galatz. The airmen arrived just in time to get a "gallery view" of the retaking of Vadeni by the Russo-Roumanian forces, and the return effort of the enemy to regain iron grip on this center of fierce conflict. The Teutonic army in dense formation and assisted by artillery drumfire went against a concentrated storm of hot lead from the defending trenches that set back the offensive movement for the counting of heavy losses.

At the same time, from the Dobrudja side of the Danube, Bulgarian batteries were blazing away at the military establishments in Galatz and also the railroad station and the railroad bridge near the town.

"Something fervent about this welcome home," observed Billy, when the flying machines settled upon the plaza, and among other craft of the squad-

ron not then engaged in signal work or bomb dropping.

The boys, having brought the chief back with them, had no reason to dodge Lieutenant Avery, or offer other accounting to that officer for overstaying the fixed "day's leave."

Avery, however, was among the absent at the time, as were also Logan, Cantrell, Salisky and Marovitch, but Lascelles and Martigne, trying to mend a shot-torn machine, contributed full measure of welcome as the only navigators of the original "bunch" on hand to do the honors.

These veterans, temporarily at loss for means of flying, suddenly remembered the recently reported shipment of aeroplane parts from Odessa, and as the young scouts were not likely to be again called into aerial service at this late hour, Martigne requested that they accompany Lascelles and himself down to the wharves in old town.

Looking around for Demonet, the boys failed to glimpse the chief anywhere on the plaza, and being informed by a hangar attendant that the aviation leader had gone to the general's headquarters, Billy and Henri willingly marched off with the comrades who were seeking new equipment for the best game they knew.

The lads, in their walk, had the opportunity of noting an instance of the renewed Russo-Roumanian activity in the matter of reinforcements, guns and

munitions—on the railroad nearest to view large numbers of troops and cars in movement. This road and its activities had been drawing all day Bulgarian artillery fire from across the river—and even as the four aviators paused as onlookers, an occasional huge shell screamed over their heads.

At the wharves the airmen had the same experience, so far as was concerned the plumping round about of hot shot, aimed at the shipping in port.

But other military affairs within the city went on just the same as though shells were never invented, and operations interrupted only when a projectile mass fairly ripped up the particular spot being utilized.

Lascelles and Martigne found what they wanted, and a truck was ready to convey the load to directed destination.

As the birdmen retraced their steps through the besieged city, Billy nudged his chum, with significant nod toward the elder pair trudging ahead, and softly observing: "If those fellows ever had a nervous system it's been a long time paralyzed."

It might be added that among those having any sort of acquaintance at all with Our Young Aeroplane Scouts, the same impression has long prevailed in regard to them.

Before the aviators had reached the high ground and flying machine quarters, night was coming on apace and the mess hour had struck.

Also, Demonet had been inquiring for his protégés, and they made haste to report to the leader. The dim glimmer of a fire shone through a canvas curtain, behind which, in the one room of a knocked-together wooden shack, the lads found the chief thumbing some papers before the glowing mouth of a rusty stove.

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE PALACE OF SERGIUS

As the boys entered the shack, Demonet greeted them with a meaning smile, and compressing the papers he was handling into packet form with the aid of a rubber band, promptly advised the young scouts that he "had something on his mind which they could lift." Becoming more explicit, while the lads stood at attention awaiting enlightenment, the chief further stated: "It is important that the writings which I have here be delivered in Jassy, to the war minister, before noon to-morrow, and, quite likely, the couriers who accept the first trust may have another imposed upon them, which will continue their journey a much longer distance. I have in recollection a pair of messengers who went southward over mountain and sea, to Imbros, three times a hundred miles, or more, in one drive, and for this same cause. Are they ready to repeat in the opposite direction?"

"You're talking now like a gentleman of leisure,

boss," laughed Billy. "If this were morning, sir, and no time to spare, I can hear you saying, 'get these dispatches to the capital as quick as the machine will fly.' But an order is an order," continued the boy, "no matter how it is put. At your service, chief."

"I don't mind confessing," said the aviation leader, "that I'm inclined to coddle you youngsters beyond the rules of discipline. Yet it must be remembered that you're the only ones on this side of the world who seem just like my own belongings."

Billy and Henri had their bunks this night alongside the stove, and by the direction of Demonet, depended upon him to declare a start when the time best served.

They, for one thing, especially appreciated possession of the fur garments provided by thoughtful gift of their old friend, Antony, when the early morning found them cutting through the upper reaches of northern Roumania, where winter is as severe as in mid-Russia.

The boys had 120 miles of straight sailing before them when they left Galatz, following the line of the river Pruth, along the Bessarabian border, which kept open the opportunity of easy shift into the dominion of the Czar, in the event of interference at the outset on the west side of the mentioned stream. Fifty miles of travel northward, and there was noth-

ing to fear, save misbehavior on the part of the war-plane, for the invading armies had never proceeded thus far into this portion of the Moldavian province.

Engine trouble compelled the aviators to alight at Hushi, some forty miles from Jassy, and there they read for the first time the "declaration of defiance," which, by order of the government, had been placarded in every town, in effect "that the Roumanian army is not conquered," and "we await with absolute confidence the hour when we shall again become what we have been, and maybe even more than that."

"They're still in the ring," was Billy's characteristic comment, "though somewhat outclassed at present."

The lads were assured of the "glad hand" in Jassy, having established recognition in their own right there by the recent exploit of bringing in the gold, and audience for them with the holder of the war portfolio was instantly arranged. When the Bangor boy had passed over the official communication entrusted to his pal and himself, the flying twins became the guests of their former acquaintance from Bucharest, and this powerful factor in governmental affairs saw to it that his young friends were entertained in manner befitting their conceded distinguished service.

But not for long did the young scouts enjoy the

inside comforts provided for this recreative period of the extended journey which Demonet had anticipated for them. These "couriers extraordinary," so designated in their credentials, some twelve hours later were summoned to the war office for further instruction and renewal of responsibility as messengers of state.

The pulse of the youths quickened a bit when they ascertained that Odessa was to be the objective point of their next high drive, for out of that great seaport of Russia, Billy and Henri had once sailed in the largest of all aeroplanes of its time, the famous "Sikorsky," which carried a dauntless crew in a rushing sky-ride between two continents.

While the boys were overhauling their warplane preparatory to immediate exit, young Trouville expressed the hope that they would "run across some of the Jackies" with whom they had braved the Bosphorus batteries.

"Stranger things than that have happened," remarked the other twin, as he climbed into the flying machine, tuned in every part to win through 150 miles of frigid atmosphere.

As the aviators swiftly neared the basins of the mighty rivers Dnieper and Dniester, upon which floated fleets of ships, they viewed again the terraced city, rising 200 feet above the level of the surrounding steppes, and hazed about this morning by clouds of chalky dust, lifted by strong winds. Pilot Billy

made descent, a familiar process here, near the aerodrome on the bay front, and presented credentials to an aviation lieutenant, who had promptly advanced to inspect the newcomers.

The paper tendered by the boy as promptly impressed the officer with the belief that the fur-clad visitors were "all right," so much so, indeed, that they were instantly favored with a personally conducted excursion up the superb flight of steps, ascending from the sea to the central square, adorned with the Richelieu statue.

Along the chief embankment, the lads recognized the magnificent residence of Sergius, the modern Monte Cristo and royal Russian, whose only child Billy had risked life to save during a runaway of maddened horses on the Nevski Prospekt, in Petrograd.

"Wonder if his dukeship has forgotten us?" Henri put the query in passing the palatial home, where a grateful host had once offered luxurious existence to the hardy skyscrapers.

"Don't you ever think it," asserted Billy; "he was too much of a bully old scout for that."

Had the accompanying officer heard or comprehended this remark, he, no doubt, would have been seized with a fit. The great Sergius spoken of as "a bully old scout!"

The aerial bearers of the officially sealed packets which they presented to the Odessa military authori-

ties had not been advised in any way of the contents of these enclosures, but they shrewdly surmised that plans were in making for largely augmented transportation of troops and munitions in general aid of the allies' fighting contingent engaged in resisting further Teuton accroachment in Roumania. Already the young scouts had observed at Galatz a forerunning example of such policy in the northern section of the invaded territory.

Having served the purpose of their present assignment, and leaving the spacious apartment wherein sat a solemn council of the "higher-ups," the majority wearing the insignia of pre-eminent rank in the Russian army and navy, Billy and Henri had a waiting contract on their hands, with which they did not know what to do, except to mark the movement in Odessa streets of the decidedly conglomerate population.

Halting in front of the Sergius palace, the aviators held debate as to the propriety of making a call on the prince of finance, who once had pledged them his eternal friendship, and whose influence had put the lads at the wheel of Russia's greatest aeroplane.

"I've an idea," argued Henri, "that his nobs will kill 'the fatted calf' when he sees you, Buddy, but even not so, it won't do any harm that I can see to at least stop and say 'howdy-do', if he happens to be home."

"Well, sonny," conceded the Bangor boy, "if you think it is the proper caper, we'll go ahead and speak our piece to the guardians at the front door. Maybe some of them will recollect your striking face and figure."

"There's no need of an ice-box to keep you fresh," retorted the other twin. "Here goes for the announcement of our presence."

The major-domo at the portal, however, settled the question for that day of getting into the palace by advising the callers that "the master is in the north, but may return on the morrow."

"Tell him, if you please," said Henri, "that Messieurs Barry and Trouville, 'couriers extraordinary,' were here to present their compliments." The speaker took advantage of the bow made by the staid servitor to turn a broad grin upon his flying partner.

"I like your nerve," muttered Billy, as the boys retraced their steps down the broad walk leading to the street. "It's us for the aerodrome now, where you'll be hidden until after we get our sailing orders."

Young Trouville's veiled jest had its result just the same, and one none the less sizable on account of the humor involved.

The flunky at the palace had taken the boy seriously, and the names given did the rest.

With their own kind in and about the aerodrome

on the bay front, the boy scouts were soon very much at home, and when they told of their notable experience in the Dardanelles with Lieutenants Moppa and Atlass of the Odessa aerial corps, the welding of brotherhood was complete. These officers, the lads were informed, were with the Russian forces at Rimniksarat, Roumania.

"Gee whiz," exclaimed Billy, upon hearing this, "we passed within thirty miles of that burg only a few days ago!"

The arrival of another day, and the boys with nothing to do but gaze into the red center of a fire blazing on the hearth in the living room of the aerodrome, the hours seemed interminably long in the passing.

Henri was about to suggest a trip up town to see if there wasn't a chance of the powers that be giving "we, us, and company" clearance papers and freedom to depart.

Before, however, the lads could make a move out of the cozy corner in which they were loafing, they caught sight of a six-footer in green and gold livery coming through the door opening from the main floor of the structure into the rest room.

This individual of imposing appearance was under guidance of one of the aeroplanists, who aimed at Billy and Henri a designating finger, and stating to the big fellow in gorgeous outfit that "these are the ones about whom you inquire."

"The master, Sergius, desires your presence, young sirs," immediately volunteered the tall ambassador, "and a carriage awaits your pleasure."

"Sounds like a play," murmured Billy to his pal, "'my lord, the carriage awaits.'" Then, in louder tone, replying to the invitation: "Lead us to it, big brother."

The onlooking aviator lifted a hand to his mouth, in effort to conceal a smile.

On the way to the palace, Henri more than once teasingly bantered his chum relative to the "nerve" which the Bangor boy had condemned to hidden expiation.

Within the richly ornate interior of the palace, the boys had hardly traversed a half length of the entrance hall when Sergius himself advanced to meet them, displaying a cordialty which dispelled in an instant all diffidence on the part of the aviators, as well as every vestige of feeling that they might be considered intruders in these splendid precincts.

"And so we meet again!" exclaimed the distinguished host, "you truants who ran away in our biggest airship and never returned!"

"For the good reason, sir," replied Billy, "that the craft you mention closed the travel season at Tenedos island and we had to hump ourselves to get another job."

"I know all about it, my lad," stated Sergius with

a smile. "The Turks objected to making right of way concession for a round trip over this water line. But the 'Sikorsky,' I assure you, is still a thing of life and action."

"A grand old brig, sir," said Henri, "and I'd give a whole lot to take another jaunt in it, like the first one."

The Russian took on an air of regret in announcing that Fredonia (the child Billy had rescued from certain death) was in Petrograd at the present time, and so deprived of the privilege now of gratefully welcoming the hero of the one thrilling adventure in her guarded young life.

This reference set the Bangor boy back into a period of embarrassed silence, relieved only by change of subject to war talk, and the answering of many questions relative to existing conditions in battle-torn Roumania.

Young Trouville, reminded by this discussion that even now orders for the return flight of his chum and himself might be awaiting them at the council room, ventured to intimate as much.

"My hospitality claims first attention, little brother." This remark by Sergius, while of bland and kindly expression, had yet the edging of a command.

"I might go further and say, my friends," added the all powerful Muscovite, "that it is in my mind to reduce the exposure of flying the whole distance by

sending you down the coast in a warship. You have served your need in Jassy, and Captain Brinska will point the shorter way to Galatz."

"Seven hands round," muttered Billy to himself, "a warship for two plain persons!"

CHAPTER XVII

LAUNCHED FROM A WARSHIP

That Billy Barry and Henri Trouville were to be conveyed to one of the several mouths of the Danube in a Black Sea war vessel is not an exaggeration of fiction, and considering the fact that these armed and armored ships were constantly operating as bombarding factors wherever on the coast the enemy had usurped occupation, not even extraordinary that there should be one or more of the cruisers constantly in commission at a principal port like Odessa for dispatch to points where shelling offshore would materially aid the allies' land forces.

But, nevertheless, it was evidence enough that our boys had a "standing at court" when they were individually named in orders for passage on one of the next proceeding ironclads and committed to the special care of the ranking officer aboard.

As they had long ago learned in serving Sergius, the lads were tied to a man with a "pull," with assured response to his every indrawing of far-reaching threads of potential influence. The usual result

of such magical manipulation was forthcoming in the present instance.

In the rôle of grateful benefactor, the "big bug" of Odessa was inclined to literally line with gold and silver every pocket in the outer covering of the young scouts, but they would have none of it, and their protest well taken that "it wouldn't get them anywhere that they could not go as easily without it," or "buy them any more than already provided."

Billy's private prohibition, expressed only to his pal, was "that nobody will ever pin the label of 'mercenaries' on us."

In only one instance were the independent youngsters unable to resist the advance of extended munificence, and it would have been sheer incivility then, if opportunity had served to offer objection. As a confirmed habit, the Bangor boy every once in awhile consulted his battered silver watch to fix the time of day, and which performance did not escape the notice of the host.

On the very morning that the lads' aeroplane was taken aboard a warship, getting up steam in the harbor, and the aviators themselves making ready to follow, Sergius restrained for a moment the leaving by his young friends from the carriage in which he had brought them to the bay front.

"Souvenirs, little brothers, of your visit to Odessa, and slight tokens of the high appreciation entertained by all of us of service rendered by you."

Bestowing upon each of the young scouts a morocco-bound box of less than hand-breadth size, the giver added a gentle push which accelerated the action of the boys in stepping from the vehicle. Before they could turn for a word, a crack of the coachman's whip over the mettlesome horses had whirled away both carriage and occupant.

The opening of the gift receptacles revealed watches of glittering gold, with the black double-headed eagle of Russia enameled on the cases.

"You can douse the tin clock now, Buddy," jollied young Trouville, seeking an outlet for suddenly indrawn breath.

"Well, his nobs certainly did put one over on us this time," declared Billy, still staring at the shining disc in its satin nest.

"Don't need these to tell us it is time to get a move on ourselves. I see it in the eye of that fellow in the bow of the gig holding down the water over there." Henri had turned his gaze toward the bay.

Carefully pocketing their new chronometers, the boys hastened to the waiting boat, manned by a half-dozen trim oarsmen, in command of a middy perched in the stern seat.

Directly, the lads were saluting a stalwart officer on the quarter-deck of the big battleship, and viewing with interest the tremendous gun equipment of the ironclad.

There was a high sea running when the mighty

vessel swung around to its course beyond the harbor, and in the rising wind more than a promise of intermingled sleet and snow.

"Rough weather," volunteered Billy, in the way of starting conversation.

"It belongs to the climate and the winter," was the laconic observation of the deck director, briefly pausing in his measured patrol of the boards.

When our boys sought cover, they had the honor of a summons to the captain's own quarters.

Noting that their shore recommendation had evidently counted for a good deal with the chief officer of the vessel, the young scouts were not as retiring in manner as they might otherwise have been, and so largely added to their knowledge of the sea side of the Balkan war game, in combination with the plenty they had picked up on land.

"Did it happen, sir," inquired Henri, "that your boat was among the vessels which pumped hot lead into Constanza not so very long ago?"

The officer nodded assent, removing a fat cigar from his heavily whiskered countenance, to say in words that he was behind several broadsides on the mentioned occasion.

"Then," gaily interposed Billy, "I can hold you partially responsible for deafness that lasted me a week after that scrap. Sonny here and I were on the wing thereabouts, and thought a volcano had blown a hole in the Black Sea."

Captain Brinska indulged in a hearty laugh over the boy's breezy account of the naval demonstration, as it appeared to him. "You have a largely-developed funny-bone, little brother," he said, wiping the mirth-moisture from his eyes with a huge handkerchief.

A half-day out, and the stormy weather not in the least abating, the warship materially slackened speed, and which procedure impressed the aviators that their "getting off" place was not so very far away, and that Captain Brinska was holding position until he aeroplane might be safely launched.

Other vessels of the Russian Black Sea fleet loomed up darkly through the snow-laden atmosphere, but off-shore a much greater distance than the ship on which our boys awaited far flight up the Danube.

The blustery breezes began to wane at nightfall, and barometer indications favored clearer weather for the coming hours. The succeeding morning brought sunshine, but with warming rays so remote that the cold was marrow-biting.

"What think you, little brothers, of the outlook?" questioned the captain, while the trio sat at early breakfast.

"As good as the best," cheerfully responded Billy. "You have the anchor down, sir, and that means we're at the jumping-off place, I guess."

"It is a straight line to Galatz, I am sure, and if

it be your pleasure to take it, the hour is ripe." The captain led the way to an upper deck. "We can launch you here," he said, "and not the first time on this ship that a runaway has been rigged for similar purpose. We put two aviators on the wing here less than a month ago, and, by my beard, they were fine fellows, too—Moppa and Atlass of Odessa. Know them, perhaps?"

"No 'perhaps' about it," cried Henri; "we once took Turkey together!"

An exchange of good-byes, and the warplane rocketed down an improvised chute, balanced, birdlike, above the waves that rolled between the ship and the shore, and then darted westward, higher and higher, over a white waste of frozen swampland.

The young scouts met no other hurrying shapes aloft, but Henri sighted in the passing, and below, a hand-to-hand fight near a wood along the river, where grenades and bayonets took heavy toll among the opposing battalions. Again, during the onward drive, the observer saw a Russian charge, and fearful havoc wrought in these ranks by enemy machine guns.

Pilot Billy, however, was out to do eighty miles in an hour, and scant attention to give to other issues. To the occasional outcry of the other twin the lad in front owed most of his knowledge of what was going on beneath the flight.

But the Bangor boy had the initial view of Ga-

latz, over the tiny little half moon of a windshield, and he took a turn at yelling a word or two.

Rather surprising, but none the less agreeable to the returning airmen, in contrast to conditions prevailing when they had departed, the city was not then enveloped in the smoke of spouting batteries, nor shaken by the thunder of the even more tremendous engines of war employed by the central powers.

All things favored easy ingress of the speeding aeroplane, and had the craft been loaded with eggs, small the breaking by the nicely timed drop engineered by Billy Barry.

The boys took a bee-line to the shack on the plaza, where Demonet made his headquarters when he was not off the ground, but the sole occupant of the enclosure at this hour was none other than Tillon, looking yet a bit peaked and with his injured arm in a sling.

"Glory be!" The Bangor boy's favorite hurrah note. "They can't keep a good man down! When did you pull in?"

"Last night," was the smiling response of the disabled aviator. "We licked them all along the line coming up, but there's the devil to pay now at Nanesti, and the chief has gone over with a lot of bomb-casters to help save the town."

"If he doesn't come back before we get the chill out of our bones," said Henri, hugging the stove,

"Buddy and I will have to fill out an eight-hour day by getting into that mix ourselves."

"I'm the only dead wood around here, it seems," sighed Tillon.

"Keep a stiff upper lip, old man," consoled Billy, "you'll be up and a coming inside of a week or two. You've done your share, anyhow, for the present."

A whirring sound outside caused both boys to quickstep to the canvas door. "Some of the bunch are heading in," announced young Trouville, reaching for his fur coat, "and I'll go and see which of the outfit it is."

"Count me in," added the Bangor boy, himself muffling up for contact with the frosty air.

Tillon directly heard the familiar voice of the aviation leader, greeting the youngsters who had just quitted the shack. And this voice also announcing with more strenuous accents that "they got the town, but it cost them something, just let me tell you."

The stove had plenty of company in the next few minutes, for in landing the chief had with him, Logan, Cantrell, Leclaire, Pentonville, Lascelles and Martigne—a rare collection, indeed, of fighting material, and including a pair of "couriers extraordinary."

For the special benefit of Tillon, as a shut-in, Demonet recounted details of the engagement in which the other aviators and himself had partici-

pated that day, of the concentrated fire by the light and heavy artillery of the enemy, in considerable force; of the desperate resistance of the defensive allies, and their retreat, dogged and stubborn in every backward step, and of a snow scene carmined by the blood of hundreds of the belligerents.

"One thing more let me say," continued the chief, "and that is, of all the handlers of aerial explosives I've seen in my time, there's the man for the top shelf"—pointing to Logan. "He's the equal of two howitzers and a machine gun in cutting a swathe in close ranks. Don't talk back to me, sir," concluded the speaker, directly addressing the fire-ball artist, "or I'll have you chucked into the guard house."

Logan assumed a boxing attitude, and was playfully girded about by the brawny arms of Pentonville.

"Saw him stop all traffic in a railroad once," put in Henri.

"Another county heard from," parried the highly praised bombster. "Somebody'll get rolled in the snow if this doesn't stop."

The members of the squadron had shifted conversation to probable action on the morrow, when Billy disclosed his new watch in making announcement that he believed it was time to eat.

Even in the half-light of stove and candle, the jeweled time-piece sparkled like dewdrops on a leaf, and the possessor was instantly surrounded by cur-

ious comrades, Leclaire humorously commanding "hands up!"

"Stand back," dramatically warned the Bangor boy, "the secret of the treasure-house I will not reveal until hunger is sated!"

But the relation was deferred, and considerably beyond the promised period, for the very good reason that the aviators answered then the peremptory summons of the shoulder-strap element down town.

CHAPTER XVIII

A LONG SLIDE FOR LIFE

After the conference at headquarters, and the receipt by Demonet of orders relative to the disposition of his air fleet in the next day of campaigning, Billy and Henri were advised by the chief that they could count themselves in the reserve class until emergency existed for another exhibit of their successful service as couriers.

"The truth of the matter is, my lads," further stated the aviation leader, "the commander-in-chief expects to use you, on call, as a means of communication with the field officers in the Buzeu valley region, west of this position, and a similar assignment to your Russian friends, Salisky and Marovitch, in the east, or Dobrudja section. The selection was made to-night—in the first instance, because the general was very favorably impressed with your recent accomplishment, and in the second, for the reason that the Muscovite flyers are most familiar with the territory where they will operate."

"We ought to feel honored," admitted Billy, "but

J'd have liked it a heap better if sonny and yours truly were to stay hitched up with the rest of the bunch. However, it must go as it lies, I guess."

"The fortune of war, young man," said Demonet, patting the boy on the shoulder.

When their fellow members of the squadron sailed the next morning for scout duty along the Sereth, the flying twins had only Tillon as a companion spectator of the general departure. The other couple chosen as special emissaries had already gone down town for consultation with the chief of staff relative to their new billet, and the boys were now impelled to do likewise.

Salisky and Marovitch were emerging from headquarters when Billy and Henri appeared in front of the building. The first named Russian greeted the young scouts by quoting a report that Bulgarian forces had just crossed the southern estuary of the Danube, in Dobrudja, and were holding the gained ground against attacks of the allies.

"You'll be lonesome in a little while, my lads," declared Salisky, when he had dealt out the news, "for it looks like the first getaway for us."

The prediction held good twenty minutes thereafter—and the boys were then the only active aeroplanists in town out of a job.

"Don't lose hope, old top," remarked Billy, turning a mock-serious look on his chum, "they'll be blowing the whistle for us before long!"

The boys did receive their call "before long"—shortly before noon, to be exact—but not by "whistle blowing," which was solely one of the Bangor boy's fancy figures of speech.

They were conducted by an orderly into the presence of the king-pin of the northern Roumanian front, who proved more forceful than eloquent in telling the airmen just what he wanted them to do.

Stabbing with a pen-point the map before him, the gruff old soldier, indicating the spot impaled, abruptly asked: "You know where the Buzeu and the Sereth meet, I suppose?"

Glancing over the single starred shoulder of the military mogul, Billy replied that such knowledge was his.

"That is where I am sending you," said the general. "Colonel Malinkoff is holding a monastery there as a fort. Tell him to stick, as reinforcements will reach him in twenty-four hours, en route here even as I speak. I give you no writing, for if you are shot down you can swallow your words, and no enemy the wiser."

"Colonel Malinkoff!" Both of the boys had a tremor in the wrist when the name was uttered. Their best friend of the Warsaw days. Service doubly dear to render now. Almost did they proclaim their intensity of feeling. But suppression ruled in these surroundings, and the young scouts

silently made their exit, primed, however, to the quick with the determination to get through, no matter the cost, or anything else.

As they figured it, the couriers had, straightaway, twenty miles to go; yet wisdom whispered that "straightaway" might be the longest route after all, infested by hostile warplanes, lifting from Braila, and surely on the alert to meet and annihilate every opposing craft of their kind venturing in the hotly contested territory.

The grimly significant words of the war chief in Galatz the boys had not forgotten—"if you are shot down you can swallow your words."

As many times illustrated and attested, the bone under the caps of the young scouts was far from being solid all the way down, and experience had been a thorough instructor to them.

Twice the map-fixed distance was a mere trifle to air drivers who had on numerous occasions pushed an aeroplane to a gait of 120 miles an hour, and so they took the devious course as choice, with the idea of hitting the hornets' nest at a point least expected.

The ambient air was of crystal clearness, though, this winter afternoon, and cloud-hiding was out of the question—any sort of concealment only to be achieved by attaining altitude to the limit of breathing. Five, ten, twelve thousand feet—Pilot Billy certainly was climbing—a mile and a half a minute

—Pilot Billy surely was going some, when he got the warplane on even keel!

Making forty miles the same as twenty was the object of this speed spurt.

It was up to Henri to cry, "hold, enough," when the flight was ripe for the turning, and when timely the great slide to earth.

The Barry lad, anticipating the latter contingency, had been gradually tipping the nose of the aeroplane downward, that the observer might make more of the underlying landscape than a faintly lined checker-board with the aid of a sharply tilted binocle.

At last the mechanical bird was hovering over the area of river confluence, and spirally descending for still nearer gauge of an offering chance to safely alight.

This proximity also revealed ebullitions of fire and smoke, in which was centered a large building, rising from a rock foundation, to which, no doubt, it originally owed the very material composing the inclosing gray and massive walls.

Chimneys of considerable height and breadth—solid masonry—surmounted each end of the structure, and between them a flat roof, quite lengthy and expansive.

Billy, with the warplane slowly circling, and now the target of many upturned guns, suddenly evolved a plan of action of risk-all nature—and nothing else

than an attempt to drop the warplane on the monastery top-side!

Would the craft be riddled by shot and shell before it lowered between the protecting chimney ramparts, or the pilot fail in calculation of space measure, or the defenders inside the walls commit the error of hastily augmenting enemy fire at the aeroplane? Like a flash the daring young aviator lumped all the perilous possibilities in the weight of one swoop, and, barring the single slip of skilled management, due to the over-haste of desperate endeavor—a too forcible impact of the plane with the tin-sheathed surface of the roof—the boys scored cleanly the initial triumph of this, their latest special assignment. They, at least, had "gotten there!"

The slight shock occasioned by the warplane bump, was almost a forgotten incident when the aviators leaped from the machine to face a suddenly appearing squad of Russian soldiers, who, with rifle muzzles forward and fixed bayonets, advanced from the nearest aperture in the roof to apply the "third degree" to the venturesome pair, astonishingly precipitated from the blue dome above.

Billy and Henri elevated hands over head, in token of ready surrender, and mentally asking nothing better than that they should be immediately haled before the commander of the garrison.

Such was the din of the assailing gunnery at the time that the attempted interrogation of the young

airmen by the Muscovite subaltern had no extension beyond the point-blank question as to the service identity of Barry and Trouville—practically answered by a display of uniform under the fur coats worn by the lads.

A galling crossfire now serving to make untenable the elevated position, the captors reached quick decision to transfer the investigation to less exposed quarters, but permitting, and even aiding Billy and Henri to push the warplane where it might be screened to some extent by the big chimney nearest at hand.

On the hurried way below Billy intimated to one of the Muscovite guards that an audience with the colonel would be very agreeable to his companion and himself, and of the greatest importance in promoting the welfare of the garrison. "We're couriers from Galatz," further explained the boy, "and speaking for the head of the northern army."

This last statement had an electrifying effect, expressed, as it had been, in the Bangor boy's best "rumbling Russian." The messengers and soldier company went the pace through the monastery halls, straight to the spacious refractory, or eating room, which the officers had made the directing center of the heroic defense being so splendidly maintained against overwhelming odds.

Colonel Malinkoff was seated at a table in the middle of the apartment, and with his back to the

door, through which the boys were ushered, seemingly oblivious of the fearful racket the big guns were making both outside and within the stone enclosure.

Twice did the soldier escorting Billy and Henri address the commanding officer before the still figure moved even a muscle.

"He's had no sleep for two days and nights," whispered the subaltern, watching for another showing of renewed activity on the part of his military superior.

Now the colonel was slowly turning his head to ascertain the cause of this disturbance of his brief seeking of relief from the harrassment of extreme weariness.

The scabbord of his sword clanked on the oaken floor as he sprang to his feet at sight of the youths, staring in return at their old friend so haggard and worn by anxiety and fatigue.

"Trouville," exclaimed the officer, recovering full stature and alert observation, "and the other one, too!"

Caps in hand the boys came forward to show their affectionate regard for their former protector and champion.

"How goes it, sir?" asked Henri, who had sensed that the "going" was a long ways from good, but at loss at the second for something more appropriate to say.

"As near to the finish, my lad," sadly stated the colonel, "as it can be without adding the period. We're hemmed in by the Bulgars and only a miracle can save the day."

"Would you call reinforcements a 'miracle,' sir?" briskly questioned Billy.

"If they came soon enough," said Malinkoff, "I might. But I must be completely befuddled not to be wondering how in the name of the full calendar you boys reached this part of the world, and what is more, this particular spot. There is a ring around this old pile that I thought nothing under the sun could crawl under or jump over."

"We just jumped over, sir, as it is in our line of business to do," advised Henri. "Now, sir," eagerly added the boy, "let me tell you right off the bat that your general sent us with the word 'stick,' for help is coming in seven league boots!"

The colonel shrugged his broad shoulders, and with hand gesture of resignation.

"In two hours or less," he solemnly asserted, "our last round of ammunition will have been fired!"

CHAPTER XIX

TO THE RESCUE OF MALINKOFF

Colonel Malinkoff had not spoken at random when he announced that the ammunition of the defense was nearly exhausted, for of every detail in the beleaguered fortress he was keenly cognizant, and as well he knew that the temper of the garrison was akin to his own in determination to make the utmost of the now fast approaching hour of last resort.

"When we can no longer roar we still can bite," was the way he expressed it to the young scouts, as the three watched through an embrasure the surely waning efforts of the interior artillerymen to reduce the ever-blazing gun positions of the attacking force.

"Not much of a show, sir, when it shall come to the final measure of cold steel against hot metal," commented Billy, who had dabbled in the war game long enough to know just what he was talking about.

"True enough, my lad," replied the colonel, "but to me there is yet an uglier outlook—showing the white flag to that Bulgar horde out there. These walls may still stand some pounding when we are done powder burning; nevertheless, when they are breached, death in the open is more to be preferred than the same fate that would surely be ours in stone shambles."

"The general said to 'stick,' " protested the Bangor boy.

"It shall be as glue, faithful courier," conceded Malinkoff, "while the barrier is intact, but in the break we will meet them half way."

Along the east wall of the building firing from within had now entirely ceased, which served to tremendously accentuate the crash of trench cannon operating outside in bombardment of that section of the stronghold. This lack of responsive action quickly inspired the besiegers to even greater effort of assault, and inviting their gunners to closer range, with telling and crumbling effect upon the stone barrier.

Directly the western rampart of the structure was also bereft of every sound of defensive activity, and in a succeeding moment the garrison entire was massed in the main hall of the monastery, a bristle of bayonets above, and every eye turned upon the commanding officer, standing like a statue just within the iron-studded portal, the opening of which

would mean either surrender or death grip with the triumphantly assembling enemy, awaiting the outcome with the zest of conquerors.

With the fall of dusk, so also had silence fallen on the scene of recent turmoil. To the surrounding soldiery the duck was dead in its nest, and a waste of powder to singe its feathers with the blaze of artillery.

Malinkoff turned his gaze from the black background of closely ranked soldiery, and in low tone, yet sharply distinct to the hearers addressed, so close to the speaker were they, bade the young scouts make haste to the roof, take advantage of the gathering gloom as an aid of unobserved escape, and "if there is anything left of your flying machine, ride like the devil"—the very words—"away from here."

The boys felt to their very finger-tips that these directions were peremptory and final—an edict that admitted of no other course for them than strict obedience.

So with a gulp in their throats, the lads hastened ascent to the top of the building, and with just enough of fast-fading daylight to put them on their way to the resting place of the warplane, they made ready for the trial of getting a lift in the space afforded for the experiment, which proved to be ample, when measured by the eyes of the experts.

They were up and had cleared the roof! A crackle of musketry, supplemented the whir of the machine! The shooting was merely at sound, for the sky-seeking warplane was enveloped by the friendly shadows of approaching darkness, and travelling like the wind!

Billy drove several miles blindly, for it had grown darker than pitch, the only illumination in and about the aeroplane being the tiny glow on the face of the compass.

Henri shifted position, as the flying machine cut through the night like a fore-pointed knife-blade, in order that he might plant an understandable word occasionally in the ear of the pilot.

"Maybe help'll get there before morning, at least, Buddy."

"And all over then," was the Bangor boy's gloomy view, loudly expressed. "We'll hit the trail in a minute for Galatz with the story on telegraph time. That's the job cut out for you now. And that's some job."

There was no seesawing on this trip, but a straight line drive in the remaining seventeen miles to be traversed. The warplane was invisible to earth in this night flight, and in less than twenty minutes had the lights of Galatz underneath.

The pilot was too familiar with the plaza landing to make a miss in striking the right spot, though he down-pointed the aeroplane searchlight as a

precaution against startling some sentry into overhasty use of a rifle.

Once on the ground, the boys bolted for headquarters, and although about breathless from the sprinting endeavor, managed to give the aide-de-camp on night duty a snapshot idea of the desperate straits to which Malinkoff and his garrison had been put.

"It's the S.O.S. call for sure," declared Billy anxiously.

"Hardly an hour ago," advised the officer, when he could get a word in edgewise, "three regiments with artillery, then detraining, were dispatched to the aid of Colonel Malinkoff."

"Infantry, I suppose," almost groaned the Barry lad. "It's an awful rocky road over which to haul guns, and besides it is more than twenty miles to go."

"Well, my lads," consoled the aide, "you are acquitted of all fault in the premises, and only a slow train responsible for the delay. There were no troops within these fortifications available, and we had to wait for reinforcements by rail. Perhaps," he continued, "the relief expedition, after all, will arrive in time to turn the tide."

"If the colonel had only a few more shots in the locker," said Billy, "I'd be betting that morning would still find him in the fort. But, sir, the jig was almost up when we left."

"Can't you turn out the air crowd, sir?" asked Henri.

"They are napping on such orders now," stated the general's right-hand man. "With the first glimpse of dawn the flyers will certainly be in action."

"And including those present, if you please," was the next plea of young Trouville.

"So be it," conceded the aide. "You have earned the right to choose for yourselves."

This much settled, the flying twins started for the plaza shack to break the rest of Chief Demonet with premature discussion of the morning getaway, for it was mighty little sleep the lads were then wanting for themselves.

At the first streak of light in the east, Billy and Henri were scalding their throats by the hurried swallowing of some very hot coffee, and impatiently soliciting the aviation leader to "get the bunch in line."

With easy toleration of the rather forward manner displayed by his protégés on this occasion, appreciating the cause of the unusual demonstration, Demonet expedited in every practical way the necessary preparation of the flotilla, for both, this day, flying and fighting.

The "thunderpumper," alone, carried enough explosive material for casting to shake the foundations of a city block of buildings, and like every other

plane in the squadron, except the courier craft, had a machine gun in working order.

Our boys, however, to avoid being a total exception in the warlike array, borrowed an extra pair of rifles from the nearest sentry box, and fully resolved to blaze away with the balance of the aerial clan, if need be, in the aid of their gallant and good friend Malinkoff.

It was soon evident that the rescue regiments in forced night march from Galatz had encountered some delaying element besides rough walking, for they had not yet reached the junction of the rivers when sighted by the aerial flotilla driving in goodly number toward the elevated site of the monastery-fort.

The straggling procession of soldiery below, then two or three miles short of the location for which start was made the previous evening, had not the campactness nor orderly array of fresh troops. Of these ranks there had been recent decimation, and every sign of hard fighting in close quarters. Yet the regiment remnants were pressing forward to fulfil their mission, or such degree of accomplishment as might still be offered to them and their arms.

First, after all, on the scene of the garrison's grim defiance of the enveloping foe, the aviators were in time to witness the sortie that finally served Malinkoff's expressed determination to finish the fight in

the open rather than chance the fate of rats in a trap.

Through the narrow entrance at the north end of the building, and in a ground quarter where the flinty surface had been impregnable to trench digging, the occupants of the defenseless fort made their rush in this early morning hour, furiously fighting their way to the slope that gently trended to merge with the east bank of the Sereth. So closely intermingled were the battling Bulgarians and Russians that the artillery of the former, in position before and behind the stronghold, could not be brought into play on the combatants at the north without wreaking death indiscriminately.

For similar reason, the warplanes hovering over the mix-up were prevented from aiding their friends with a downfire of explosives, though at the first move of inclosing of the outer rim of the Bulgar ring, the intervening clear space was treated to a veritable hail of bombs.

In the meantime, Billy and Henri had transferred their attention to the advancing reinforcements, which though weakened by their wayside encounter near Bralia, were yet of numerical strength sufficient to create considerable diversion.

The boys, flying low before the advancing columns, presented a guiding mark, and Henri invited haste by constant exercise of signals.

Not for long, however, could the young scouts

continue in the van of the relief regiments, for the latter were now emerging from the valley and in plain view of the hostile batteries higher up. Then the guns on the hill began to thunder and crash, and the storm of missiles sent Billy and Henri kiting skyward. The ascending marchers braved the blazing reception and reached a level where their own cannon could be worked.

The melee in which the garrison members were participating lost importance with the advent of a new force in possession of artillery and, apparently, plenty of ammunition.

With the counter-attraction somewhat relieving the pressure of the hemming tide of fierce antagonists, Malinkoff and those of his faithful followers still upstanding hurled themselves, with rifles clubbed, at the thinning line of opponents backing on the slope, and, winning through, dashed down the declivity to the river.

The keenly observant aviators, circling aloft, covered this escaping movement with a shower of explosives that effectually checked pursuit, and one of the warplanes dared a drop on the very narrow strip of sandy soil trimming the very brink of the stream.

As the performers of this feat scrambled out of the flying machine so neatly placed on solid foundation, Colonel Malinkoff sheathed his sword with one swift movement, that he might extend both hands in

his most fervid greeting to Our Young Aeroplane Scouts.

"Couldn't lose us, colonel," dryly observed Billy, working a bluff on his own inclination to cheer, "no matter how hard you tried."

CHAPTER XX

FOUND FLOATING BRIDGE

THE lately arrived regiments from Galatz, outnumbered five to one, were now slowly backing to the ice-bound Sereth, unable to hold the position they had first attained by reason of sudden surprise advance from the concealing valley curve. Malinkoff instantly marshalled his men for the effort of stemming in some degree the tide of retreat, while the boys sought the upper reaches, rejoining the aerial squadron, whirling about through fountains of enemy fire and bombing in return the Bulgar battery points.

No sooner had the young scouts lifted high above the battle scene, and clear of the smoke-laden area in lesser altitude, than Henri made visual discovery of another impending contribution to the hostile cause—quite a large body of troops marching up the valley from the direction of Braila, gray-garbed veterans in precise formation—and at the time only about three miles distant.

Young Trouville instantly passed the warning to

his chum, and the pilot put the warplane to a dive that the observer might apprise, by signal, the Russian force that new menace was looming up in the east, and further retrograde movement in that direction would spell complete disaster.

Colonel Malinkoff, having assumed command of the Muscovite troops, immediately demonstrated his rare ability as a tactician by so deploying his men that the line extension northward was gradual, yet of sure accomplishment. Of less effect now the Bulgar guns, and much better the opportunity of the retreating soldiery to evade the dire predicament of holding between two fires.

This orderly withdrawal achieved without loss of time or any appreciable number of men, the retirement was hastened in the frozen swampland along the river. Colonel Malinkoff was well aware that in successfully manœuvering out of a tight place, as in the present instance, he owed something to the Bulgar lack of understanding of modern war —otherwise good fighters, these hardy fellows, but hardly "up to snuff" when measuring wits with a trained campaigner like the Russian commander.

A different proposition, though—that coming up the road from Braila!

Demonet's flotilla was still "carrying on" in the sky department in a manner wholly disagreeable to the hillside artillerymen, who, however, were just

raising a shout at sight of their ally force quickstepping through the valley.

Giving the entrenched gunners a final round of fireballs, and one of which blew up an ammunition dump, the aviators winged in pursuit of the Malinkoff command, making all speed up the river bank.

In a scouting journey ahead, Billy and Henri made another find—"a change of luck," the young pilot called it, and nothing more nor less than a living picture of the pontoon crossing of the river by Russo-Roumanian soldiers.

This discovery was made some ten miles in advance of the Malinkoff column, and it was a matter of mental debate by the warplane pilot with himself as to the better proceeding—speed the coming of the troops behind or hold the troops in front until arrival of the rear contingent.

To do both was the compromise decision, but first to cinch the sure thing at hand. So the flying machine made the plunge there and then, and the boys were on foot to meet the leaders leaving the floating military bridge.

When the young scouts had convinced the officers they faced that they were allies of the correct persuasion, and putting their story in direct form, the couriers were advised that the landing force at this point would remain stationary for a day or two, to here guard the pontoon from any would-be destroyers. The aviators were also urged to carry

the good word in haste to Colonel Malinkoff, the mention of whose name seemed to inspire the hearers with eager desire to be of service to him.

"We've hit the right nail on the head this time," rejoiced the Bangor boy, when the warplane was again in the air, "and a change at last of the long faces we have worn for a week."

Henri, on the way back, even lent his voice to song, to the accompaniment of insistent motor buzzing.

The news conveyed by Barry and Trouville had an immediately bracing effect upon the weary marchers in the swamp region, and the couriers were heartily cheered as they resumed their seats in the warplane as guides of the brisker forward movement now in order.

In the strenuous demonstration of the morning the other flyers of the flotilla had exhausted their supplies of explosive material, and the petrol upon which their motive power depended was at seriously low ebb. With assurance now that the troops which they were convoying would soon merge with a formidable force, Demonet led his aerialist company in return flight to Galatz, first, however, exacting an agreement from Colonel Malinkoff that the pair the squadron was leaving in the field should report in the fortified city on the Danube the very hour their present service was completed.

When they had witnessed the union of the Malin-

koff command with the military array at the east end of the floating bridge across the Sereth, Billy and Henri expected to receive forthwith their bid to depart, but something happened along about this time which made the boys forget that they were entertaining any such anticipation.

The change of thought was joined with an impression of fact that there were more than a couple of working aviators still in evidence hereabouts, and not identified with the Demonet collection of experts. Also that there was such a thing as a light aeroplane of later fashion than the biplane which the young scouts had been operating in these parts.

Within fifty yards of where the flying twins were then standing, a couple of warbirds came spinning to finely measured descent, wasp-like creatures, with the imprisoned power of a hundred horses throbbing in their wonderful engines. The young scouts did not hesitate in promptly reducing the distance between them and the place of alighting by the incomers, an instinctive movement on the part of the lads when there was anything doing that pertained to aviation.

The "cabins" of the modern machines at rest on the level suggested the pilot houses of palatial yachts in miniature, and as the pilots were yet tucked therein, only their heads were visible above the freeboards.

Before the bodies of the airmen in the planes were

revealed, our boys were near enough to get a good view of the faces of the operating pair.

Remembering faces was the long suit of both our lads, but it was no strain of memory in this instance to recall the features presented for inspection.

Neither were the countenance possessors a bit slow in exhibit of similar aptitude in the matter of instantly picking old friends out of strange assemblages or surroundings.

Indeed, the first outcry of recognition came from the aeroplanes—"the 'Sikorsky' lads!"

The half-shout was supplemented by a Jack-in-the-box, full length appearance of Lieutenants Moppa and Atlass.

"Gee whiz," exclaimed Billy, "his dukeship at Odessa said you were somewhere in these diggings, and here you are like a house afire!"

"Say, my hearties," declared Henri, when the exuberance of initial greeting had in a measure subsided, "you are certainly traveling in style these days."

"Not on as large a scale, however, laughed Moppa, "as when the four of us paid our respects to Constantinople. But rather neat these little cutters, after all. Look them over, lads."

Everything about these most recent productions of aeroplane manufacture for war work was finished in hardwood, and there were polished nickel instruments to indicate speed, height, angle and all

an airman ought to know; there were ingenious sights for the guns, and range finders for bomb dropping, and a little device to tell that the bombs had been properly released in turn and hurtling on their way to the objective selected for attack.

"This war is changing and developing the aeroplane almost from hour to hour," asserted the Bangor boy. "Sonny and I have been in the building business ourselves, and what we called marvels of the air two years ago, have no more relation to the machines of to-day than the clumsy attempts of a barnyard fowl to the flight of a swallow. We've driven a dozen different planes this year, and something new about each succeeding one. Up to a short time ago, as a pilot, I sat behind a wheel, and now the control of the fighting aeroplane has been reduced to the simplicity of but a single controlling lever."

"The 'joy stick', we call it," said Atlass, who always delighted in a technical talk where his profession was concerned. "It's a great improvement. I move this stick a few inches one way or the other, and with an occasional foot pressure on the rudders can climb, drive, loop, side slip, fall a couple of thousand feet and flatten out 'as right as rain.' You know how it is yourself, my lad, if they've given you the latest rigging."

"We've got a durable craft, well and good," stated Billy, "but nothing half so fancy as these

little ducks here. What's your speed, anyhow, when you're in a hurry?"

"In the neighborhood of 140 miles an hour in 'level air,'" proclaimed the Russian driver; "guess 180 would be nearer to the mark 'down hill' or driving out of a loop."

"Good night!" Young Barry threw up his hands in surrender. "That's a few miles faster than our present equipment, I'll confess, but there's a chance for us yet. Eh, sonny?"

"Oh, we'll grow, all right," was Henri's confident rejoinder. "And you must keep in mind, Brother Atlass, that we ride a machine built for two, which makes some difference."

"Talking 'shop,' I'll wager," broke in a deep voice, as the owner thereof edged into the group of interested aviators. The speaker was Colonel Malinkoff. "I regret exceedingly to spoil sport," continued the officer, "yet I am compelled to keep a promise to one who did a mighty good turn for us when it was most needed. Young men" (fixing look on Billy and Henri), "I am forced by agreement to send you back where you belong, and it is a duty far from my own desire. From the command and myself, my lads, accept a thousand thanks for your gallant endeavors in our behalf."

Before the young scouts could recover speech, the colonel was striding ahead of his men, preparing for passage of the floating bridge.

Lieutenants Moppa and Atlass lingered a few moments to wish the boys a safe journey, and also to urge a visit to the station at Rimnik-sarat, if the youngsters could possibly get an assignment that would send them in that direction.

Left to their own devices, and under order, the flying twins set their warplanes going at full speed toward Galatz.

CHAPTER XXI

OUR SCOUTS IN FRIGID FLIGHT

INTENSE cold and heavy snows were interfering with military operations all along the Roumanian front, and except for an occasional observation tour, the members of the aerial squadron had been reluctantly posing as gentlemen of elegant leisure for almost a week since the return of Billy and Henri from the river point where they had luckily discovered the floating bridge and brought about the safe merger of the Malinkoff command with the larger force stationed at Rimnik-sarat.

Salisky and Marovitch, the couriers operating on the war side east of Galatz, were among the restrained aviators on the plaza, and the most strenuous grumblers in camp in regard to the enforced inaction. Inured to the frigid atmosphere of the north, these Russians viewed all winter days alike, and enforced "stove lounging" always was purgatory to them.

With our young scouts, by reason of the warm run of blood in youthful arteries, and, too, experience in flying over frozen steppes, also impervious to chill, the Muscovites made common cause in concocting some scheme to break the monotony of inside existence.

With the temporary cessation of hostilities came also the revelation that this condition was a boon to Galatz, for it had developed in the passing week that the rumor of an alarming shortage of ammunition in these fortifications was a verity, and an attack in force and persistence by the enemy just then would gravely jeopardize the safety of this Verdun of the Balkan war zone.

It was known to the military authorities in the citadel that by the one great navigable channel through which ocean-going vessels could proceed this far inland—the middle or Sulina branch of the Danube—a large shipment of munitions was en route, somewhere in the hundred mile course between Galatz and Roumania's sole remaining deep water seaport.

The journey of Our Young Aeroplane Scouts to Odessa had not been in vain—but deliverance now of the fruits of this visit to the Russian metropolis was a mighty uncertain proposition, owing to the freezing grip of this unprecedented winter in northern Roumania.

The probability of the Danube channel being

choked with ice was the chief and worrying thought in Galatzan headquarters. The quartette of aerial couriers, chafing against the rule of nothing to do, little reckoned at rising time one Saturday morning that here was to be the outlet of their surplus energy, and not even a surmise in their minds as to what was wanted when suddenly summoned by the powers that be.

"Not afraid of the frost, are you?" was the inquiry that greeted the four scouts when they entered the directing center down town.

Salisky and Marovitch merely grinned for reply, while Barry and Trouville indulged in negative shake of heads. Not one of them was certain whether or no it was a facetious interrogation on the part of the orderly who was doing the asking or not.

The general, however, with his abrupt manner of speech removed any belief of humor in the situation. "There are several ships supposed to be coming up from the Black Sea," stated the commander-in-chief, "and as to that supposition, I desire to know if it be correct. The vessels are 4,000 tons register, and if your eyes are good, they cannot escape your notice. It is most important to know if the transports are in block or on the move. Wireless communication gives us no tidings. Get the route from the aide, and get away."

"This is 'getting' a job in a hurry," remarked the

Bangor boy to his chum when they were beyond the hearing of the army mainspring. Directly the young pilot was saying to the right-hand officer in the next room: "Sure we know the river way to Sulina. Been there before, sir."

When Demonet heard of the mission charged, in part, to his youthful recruits, he was quick in his caution to them to "bundle up," and beware of the insidious benumbing of the piercing frost then prevailing.

"We were vaccinated against that in the Carpathians, chief," laughed Henri, "but all the same, sir, we'll load on every fur and rag we own. And, maybe," added the boy, "we'll sight the boats not so very far distant."

The aviation leader was not prepared to predict as to the extent of the proposed drive, but his usual smile was absent as he watched the outgoing flight of the two warplanes.

Tracing the trend of the water highway eastward, the aviators looked out and down upon an earth carpet of dazzling whiteness as far as the eye could reach, and the sunrays marked glittering ice lines for miles and miles, enclosing the channel of the mighty river.

Occasional smoke columns, right and left and remote, lifted to the cloudless canopy overhead, indicative of campfires, but not yet a puff of black vapor from the funnel of a steamship in the Danube.

Twenty miles had been so traversed, and the observers' glasses anticipated half as many more ahead. Still there were no sign of the transports expected in Galatz.

Fifty miles now rolled up behind the airmen—then sixty.

Henri and Salisky, alert observers, here gave simultaneous vent to loud proclamation, one shouting "chimney working, Buddy," and the other, in his own fashion, and in the Russian lingo for "there she blows, brother."

Ships in the channel, sure enough—three in number, "good-sized hookers," as Billy had once called them.

The big boats were yet several miles distant, but so clear was the atmosphere that even without the aid of binocles the slow-moving craft were showing every line, fore and aft, and from water to top-deck.

"Give them the colors, sonny," cried Pilot Barry over his shoulder, as the warplane skimmed nearer and nearer.

Salisky, in the other machine, was already trailing the Russian streamer, and without shot or challenge the winged speeders scattered snow particles in speedy alighting along the Danube brink.

No sooner down than Billy was applying some of the congealed moisture to his "marble hands," for the purpose hastily removing therefrom the heavy

gauntlets, which with all their warmth had not defeated frost-bite.

The steamers in the river stopped progress, and from the leading vessel a small boat was launched and vigorously propelled through the ice drifts shoreward.

It presently appeared that the sailor in the prow of the cutter, and the first man ashore, knew both Salisky and Marovitch, and there was no necessity of any further identification. It also shortly developed that the vessels belonged to the fleets controlled by Sergius, and when the boys displayed the watches, with which, as Billy stated, the "boss had tipped" them, the tendered hospitality was doubled in fervency.

While the aviators, aboard ship, were "thawing out" in the engine-room, they advised the captain addressed of the purpose of their errand, at the same time learning the extent and bulk of the military stores in transit, and as near as possible obtained an estimate of the time it would take for the vessels to complete their voyage of delivery.

"While we're talking," observed Henri, donning his fur greatcoat in preparation for departure, "you sailor men can thank your lucky stars that old King Winter has put frozen handcuffs on the outside artillery crowd round here, for I imagine a hot shot in the midst of the stuff on board would paint this landscape as red as the color will spread."

"It's all in a lifetime, little brother," smilingly replied the Muscovite captain, "and we have some guns of our own with considerable reach in time of trouble."

"Well, good luck to the finish of this voyage, sir, and then some." Billy was ready to back-track as soon as he could get a leg in the waiting warplane on shore.

Uncovering the mechanical sections of the flying machines, carefully blanketed to prevent a freeze-up, the aviators struck out for Galatz with all the power that could be applied to the craft. All went well until the airmen had so nearly approached the fortified city that ten more miles would mark them down on the plaza.

Then it was that the observers sighted several other warplanes to the west, and coming like the wind toward the river, the maintaining of which direction by the new contenders for aerial right of way would bring them to direct crossing of the course that was being now pursued by the four couriers.

Henri had his glasses fixed on the oncomers for a couple of minutes before he shouted to his partner that "it's the wrong crowd for us, Buddy! Swing away, and do it now!"

The pilot was on another tack instanter, with Salisky following suit in the companion plane with equal celerity.

Strange as it may have seemed to the scout quartette, it was speedily demonstrated that they were not the game which the hostile machines proposed to hunt. In dodging contact with the Austrian flyers, the Galatzan outfit had a free field and no apparent institution of a chase with destructive intent on the part of the enemy craft.

Looking backward, after a side drive of three or four miles, the fleeing airmen had a view of the aeroplane flock at the rear sailing full speed over the river course eastward.

Our boys realized at once with a lightning stroke of comprehension, that the swiftly passing flotilla was out for no other purpose than to meet and make attack from aloft upon the Russian transport boats.

Somehow or other—by a wireless apparatus that was still working, very likely—the central powers command in possession of Braila had evidently "got wind" of the munitions shipment, and, impracticable to attempt capture by foot movement, had dispatched the space-consuming squadron, as noted, to attempt the blowing up of the ammunition laden steamers.

Exercising to the speed limit their quick-thinking specialty, the young scouts determined forthwith, in hasty mid-air conference, to make the one last endeavor that might save the floating magazines from

the probable dire effect of continuous overhead bombing.

All of the time Billy had been guiding for Galatz at the warplane's very best pace—and going some, it can well be believed!

CHAPTER XXII

NOT A MINUTE TO LOSE

Billy and Henri made the plaza landing fully a mile ahead of their companion airmen, and running like deer afoot to the Demonet shack electrified the leader and others of the aviation corps at the time therein with their rapid-fire utterance, in plea for instantaneous action on the part of the squadron to serve the saving purpose outlined, without punctuation, by the excited couriers.

"Every minute's an hour, chief," cried the Bangor boy, "and only a fighting chance at that to hit the right spot in time to do any good!"

The head of the flying contingent was not slow in grasping the import of the issue presented by the young scouts, and by way of illustration ordered the bugling of the alarm signal, which brought with no laggard step members of the aerial corps from all directions. As a matter of rigid regulation, every machine in the hangars was in shape for immediate

flight on call, and an admirable exhibit of efficiency was the prompt manner in which the warplanes were manned by fully prepared operators.

The flying twins had jumped to the task of replenishing the petrol supply of their own warplane, and Salisky and Marovitch, though the last in, were close competitors of the younger pair in being first to get out again.

When Demonet had dispatched a messenger to headquarters with explanation of the independent measure of hurried departure, the whole flotilla began flight, with Barry and Trouville in the forefront.

Ten minutes had elapsed between the sounding of the alarm signal and the outshooting of the squadron.

Fifty miles were to be covered before the expedition could show its mettle in rescue rôle, or figure in mourning capacity over a great loss to the cause being served.

Pentonville and Leclaire, in the "thunderpumper," by reason of the double engine capacity of the armored airship, had gradually forged ahead of the others in the long run, and when the first faint reverberations of powder practice reached the ears of the aviators, the big Briton and his partner were in fair way to strike the original blow as representatives of the Galatzan outfit.

The Russian shipmaster's claim that the trans-

ports had some guns of considerable reach was proving up to estimate; indeed, the long range of the aforesaid cannon had served to keep the assailing aircraft at so respectful a distance that up to the time when the "flying whale" butted into the winged attack, the bombsters had reached nary a vital spot in the hulls of the steamers.

Intent upon their task of showering the ships with explosives, the Austrians paid no heed to the odd intruder until its pilot deliberately dived into the cluster of circling craft, the charging machine a veritable pepper-box in scattering lead. Getting beneath the nearest aeroplane, Leclaire fired an entire drum of cartridges into it at fifteen yards. The hostile craft collapsed and "crashed." That is the supreme word in the lexicon of the flying corps. A machine may fall or dive, but until it is actually seen to "crash" it is not counted as a "casualty" to the enemy.

Before the other hostile warplanes could retaliate upon the offending cruiser, the rest of the Demonet squadron had appeared in full force on the scene of action, and almost doubling the number of the Austrian flotilla. From that time on it was a running fight, and indecisive in any other effect than driving off the would-be destroyers of the ammunition vessels.

With an aerial patrol of the waterway now established, the steamers were enabled to proceed at

top speed, and their commanders relieved of continuous and apprehensive lookout.

The young scouts were immediately dispatched on return journey to Galatz, that the commander-in-chief might be apprised of the situation and the more than fair prospect at present of the sorely needed munitions getting through to destination.

"We're keeping most of the beef and brawn out here," happily remarked the aviation leader, "but a goodly portion of the brains of the outfit is going with our flying information bureau."

Billy yelled something that sounded like "come off, boss," as the warplane he was driving buzzed into the air.

The boys, at headquarters, went through a "warming" process from which they could not escape, making the remarkable discovery that the general had a spine that would bend on occasion—and this the occasion!

Demonet's early foot messenger from the plaza had given all the details, as he had heard them, of the notable enterprise of the youngest members of the squadron in agitation of the relief measure which had swept the plaza clean of aeroplanes in a few minutes.

Here again were the quick-witted couriers with tidings that elevated the spirits of the eager listeners to the topnotch of enthusiasm, and no lesser degree of approbation in bestowal upon the heralds.

In attempt to evade the "festivities," as the Bangor boy denominated the demonstration, he suggested the propriety of his chum and himself rejoining the river patrol, which proposition was promptly vetoed by the entire staff.

"We desire that you retain enough of yourselves upon which crosses may be pinned," pleasantly observed the chief figure of the uniformed assemblage. "If your prowess serves you also at table, that is your next assignment."

When the ships came in, in early evening, Our Young Aeroplane Scouts were in fine fettle and stoking the stove in Demonet's shack to a white heat.

The aviation leader, indeed, instantly proclaimed that "this place is like an oven."

Nevertheless, none of the incoming airmen just then showed any disposition to avoid the glowing vicinity of the sheetiron enclosure.

"Well, boss," was Billy's hail to the head of the corps, "I suppose now we'll be able to give 'em both barrels if they should try to climb over the garden wall."

Demonet fixed a quizzical glance upon the nonchalant youngster. "You're a cool one, I must say," was the verbal accompaniment of the look he gave him.

"Hardly that, sir, at present," laughed the lad, giving the stove another poke, with a one-time ramrod.

The chief indulged a gesture of mock despair, and proceeded to divest himself of an overweight of garments.

War moves still hampered in a large degree by icy fetters, the aviators for some days to come were again condemned to idleness in quarters, but ever ready and alert to accept the first diversion that might offer or invite them to active duty.

"It is the unexpected that is keeping me out of the dumps," observed Henri, at the end of a trying day of loafing around the stove, "along with the comforting thought that something might happen, any minute."

"That's right, sonny," yawned Billy; "don't let anything mar that remarkably cheerful disposition of yours."

Just then the door of the shack swung aside, letting in a cold draft, and also the fur-shrouded shape of Salisky.

"I've been hearing some talk downtown," said the Russian, "about a change of base for this skyscraping crowd. There's a lot of fighting going on to the west of this position, according to mess gossip, and you need not be surprised if our chief should suddenly issue an order to move. Saw him at headquarters half an hour ago."

"Tell the porter, please, not make up a bed for me to-night," bantered the Bangor boy, "while I pack my grip."

The Muscovite, however, had not gone astray as a news-gatherer.

Every member of the aerial squadron answered an assembly call before the evening had much further advanced.

CHAPTER XXIII

BILLY'S SAFETY DROP

By noon of the next day the Demonet flotilla was co-operating with the Russian offensive near Kimpolung, 140 miles west of Galatz, and witnessed the piercing of Teutonic positions on a front of two miles. The aviators soon realized that here "something was doing" when above the violent artillery fire, in the midst of exploding shells and black shrapnel puffballs, coming nearer and nearer like the extending finger tips of some hand of death.

With cessation of Muscovite onslaught and the occupancy of the captured fortifications, the airmen, in respite, had the opportunity of mingling with their new comrades on the ground. Among the victorious forces of the day our boys rejoiced in the discovery that Rimnik-sarat had contributed several regiments, and Colonel Malinkoff with them.

Not for an hour or two, however, did the young scouts have the opportunity of making their presence known to their particular friend on the commanding general's staff, but in the intervening time

there was another meeting in the camp space assigned to the aviation contingent which afforded Billy and Henri an additional thrill of pleasurable surprise. Lieutenants Moppa and Atlass had just arrived in their up-to-date aeroplanes from their late station near the river—traveling, as they stated, the 100 miles in half the number of minutes.

When the boys finally wound their way through the resting Russian ranks and the avenues alight with campfires to the field quarters of the officers, they stood within ten feet of the man they sought before he turned and recognized them.

It took about three strides of the colonel's lengthy limbs to reach the lads and their hands.

"Another loan by Galatz!" he exclaimed; "and I am still owing interest on the last borrowing."

"Come to stay with you a while this time, I guess," volunteered Billy. "The whole push of us are on these rolls now."

"Twice welcome to this 'light brigade,'" said the colonel. "It will be a big help to us."

"A big help." True, indeed!

Almost beyond remote conception the indispensable part of aviation is playing in the old world war. What vital work the "wings" accomplish! Without them the big guns would have no far-seeing eyes to correct their shells. Without them and the hundreds of photographs they daily take, the map-makers could not trace each detail of the trench po-

sitions. Without them the general staff could not accurately know what is going on by day and night behind the enemy lines. Without them modern war would lose its most fascinating phase. The "good flying" of a single day or any front may represent a day of a hundred flights, a day of four-score aeroplanes in wing-to-wing combat—a day of a thousand personal incidents and deeds of daring in the once strange strata of high, thin air.

Colonel Malinkoff had briefly voiced an estimate of such service, in blunt soldier way, but the words admit of myriad multiplication.

In the scout work of the following morning, Billy, Henri, Salisky and Marovitch were assigned together as aerial inspectors along the Kimpolung-Jacobeni railroad, where the Russians were pushing southwestward. While operating some distance ahead of the column depending upon them for signal advices relative to the distribution of the enemy forces on both lower level and higher mountain slope, the four aviators were quite frequently exposed to battery fire and also sharp-shooting by riflemen, at elevated points right and left of the busy battle line. The airmen, though, "stuck to their knitting," as the camp-phrase has it, and without mishap until, oddly enough, they had passed the last hostile redoubt to the south not yet reached by the Muscovite guns. It was here that Billy felt a sag in the warplane, and by ear detected something rad-

ically wrong with the previously fast whirring propeller of the machine, which had been maintaining for the preceding ten minutes a height of about a thousand feet, but now drifting downward in manner of increasing rapidity.

The intrepid young pilot aimed the wavering craft as accurately as he could at the base of a mountain, rising a short distance to the right of the frontal drive of the warplane, and gaining a hundred-foot approach, sent the craft in a sudden nose dive upon the yielding top of a high-piled snow-bank, over which the aeroplane skimmed like a huge ski, until gently halted by the clogging enfoldment of one of the white billows lying close to the rocky face of the frowning acclivity.

Of this episode there were no witnesses, for the marching troops of which the boys were "advance agents" had digressed southward several miles to the rear, in order to attack the Austro-German position in that direction, and the companions in flight of the young scouts had closely followed this movement.

"We're certainly up against it this time, sonny," ruefully remarked the Bangor boy, half rising in the plane to shake off the snow with which he was heavily powdered from head to foot.

"If you mean the mountain, old pal," was the attempt-to-be-cheery reply of Henri, "you're surely right. Have a thought, though, Buddy," continued

young Trouville, "of what might have happened if it hadn't been for this feather-bed."

Billy, never nursing a complaint more than a minute, had turned his energy to a crawling search for the cause of the warplane's recent eccentric conduct. It developed that one of the propeller blades had stopped a chunk of lead, and to fashion and fasten a duplicate was a job of some size, even with the proper material at hand—of which latter proviso, no such luck was present.

"No use sitting here that I can see," finally declared Billy, when the difficulty had resolved itself in most baffling phase. "I guess the best thing to do is in trying for a lift by the power of shanks' engine. I want to know where I'm going before I start."

Wading through the accumulated snow, waist deep, the boys won solid foothold on the wind-swept rocks above, and kept their blood in circulation by continuous climbing for the next half hour.

Once reaching the timber line on the mountain side, the scalers found the going less strenuous, but the cold, if anything, slightly more impressive.

The climbers were bending their efforts toward the south side of the mountain, where Henri had "glassed" an inward cut of table-land, and from which natural platform the lads, outlooking, expected to get the lay of the land and fix the later location of the command to which they now belonged.

Nearing the goal of their ascending journey, Henri acquired the halting-habit in every few rods of advance, and as many times showed an upturned and twitching nose.

The repeated performance directly drew a demand from Billy for information in regard to his chum's persistent imitation of a "coon-dog in distress."

"I smell smoke," declared young Trouville, when so pressed for explanation. "Not the gunpowder brand," he further asserted, "but burning wood."

A puff of wind just then brought evidence to the olfactories of the other twin that there really was something in the claim of his chum, but at the moment there was no proof to the eye of any existing bonfire in the immediate vicinity.

As a matter of precaution, however, and in deference to the sense of smell, the lads "made haste slowly." They had no desire to meet any new acquaintances in these strange parts without the formality of previous introduction!

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HAVEN ON THE HEIGHTS

PUSHING their way through the ice-coated undergrowth that surrounded the plateau, and scattering with every arm movement showers of glistening particles from the congealed decorations of the bushes, the boys snuffed a still more pungent odor of woodsmoke as they neared the circular clearing, extending forward like the half of a mammoth dinner-plate, with the remaining portion of the disc deeply receding underneath an overhanging rocky shelf.

The mysterious and aromatic scent, the young scouts were now about certain, had its origin somewhere in the depths of the extensive fissure backing into the rugged front of the mountain, and the same crevice very soon thereafter produced the first sign of life the lads had noted since venturing into the altitudinous vicinity.

So situated that they could see without being seen, the aviators, treading the edge of the open, stood fast in their tracks when from out of the shadow of

the stony canopy a tall figure moved into full view on the sunlit level.

About the stature, assumed listening attitude and garb of the mountain apparition there was something strangely familiar to the staring airmen, and quickened heart-beats testified to sudden arousing of more than passing interest in the identity of the man holding their rapt attention.

The peculiar shape of the fur cap, the alert manner of carrying the long rifle resting in an arm curve, and all before and here stated, combined to hasten recognition.

Billy spoke first, and with almost positive conviction.

"It's Antony or his ghost!"

The boys were about to draw a little closer to the crevice for one more look before surrendering all discretion and making a charge, full front, upon the prophet of the hills. But now the figure first observed had ceased to be the one lonely sentry at the fissure. Standing alongside, and at each elbow of this "very image of Gregoire," were two others—lanky fellows, with stringy black beards and clad in tattered uniforms of ill-protection from the stinging chill of the frigid season.

Presently, however, the man with the odd headgear established for himself the right to be hailed in the name he had made good among his people in Wallachia, by advancing near enough to the watch-

ing youths for them to know beyond semblance of doubt that it was the self-same Roumanian with whom they had been in close comradeship in the late live days at and near the Iron Gates of the Danube.

Billy trilled the whistle of known import to the former companion of forest and plain, and amusedly noted the effect upon the old scout, stopping short and glancing about in search of the "bird" that was giving him the "get together" call.

The Bangor boy bounced out of the bushes with joyfully ringing address: "Halloo, chief!"

Antony looked for a second as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

When Henri also appeared in the open, though, the spell was broken, and the old footing of the trio renewed its binding force in the same degree as if there had been no separation.

Gregoire very earnestly inquired as to the welfare of Pentonville and Leclaire, then leading the way beneath the head-high shelf outstanding from the mountain side, and where the pair in ragged regimentals had retired at the first appearance of the youths.

The three scouts had proceeded some twenty feet in this dark interior when all of a sudden, after making abrupt turn, they stood in a rock chamber of unseeable height and considerable circumference, in the center of which a log fire blazed and disseminated warmth to a sitting group of a half dozen or

more individuals of the same type that the boys had seen outside in company with their old friend.

"Friends to friends," said Antony, by way of collective introduction and devoting a hand each to the shoulders of the young aviators. "My countrymen here," he continued, speaking directly to the boys, "are survivors of the fire and flood at Fundeni bridgehead, awaiting in this refuge the healing of their wounds and the near day when, freshly armed and newly clothed, they will bid again defiance to the enemy. That I am far afield this hour is but to succor such as these, and strike when I may at the mailed breast of the invader."

The youngsters lingered longer than they thought to do in the haven of the heights, and the faces about them, as revealed by the fitful flames of the damp-log fire, were those of good-natured and kindly men, who might, not unnaturally, be expected to show the reverse after the gruelling through which they had passed.

By the meager point of light in the top of the rock chamber, marking the slender outlet of the smoke rising from below, Billy and Henri were assured that the sun was still in working order outside, and, too, reminding of the importance of getting their bearings before the evening finish of such illumination.

As the warplane was lying, it would be practically impossible to attempt its repair, but, failing to bring

aviation relief by signal endeavor on the high ground, it was a source of satisfaction to make a mental memorandum that to the traveling "bundle" of the Roumanian scout there was strapped a pair of snowshoes. With this sort of footgear, the airmen were confident that one of them could push or pull the disabled machine out of the drift onto a solid working level.

Asking Antony to show them the best point from which to view the valley and the railway line south of the mountain, and, as well, the most conspicuous point, looking from the lower strata, to later exhibit their signals, the young scouts left the cave in much better spirits than at any time since they had plunged into the snow-bank.

The boys had need of a surplus stock of cheerful inspiration, for the first lookout impressed nothing except a rolling panorama of magnificent distances, and a confusing picture of faraway military operations, with little encouragement for specific picking in the mixture of any particular friendly corps.

Billy's comment on the landscape situation briefed itself in the remark that "walking wouldn't get us anywhere in a week."

The other twin had given himself up to the enterprise of "glassing" the upper reaches, and with still less encouragement than vouchsafed to the Bangor boy in his ground view. "All of the high rolling

stock," complained young Trouville, "must have gone into the hands of a receiver, for if there's a sign of a 'wing' aloft I'll eat it. Buddy, take it from me," further stated Henri, "the one thing to do is to get a new paddle in the plane or sign up for the balance of the winter with the mountaineers' union."

"Nothing left for an arbitration commission," conceded the Barry lad. "I'm joining you, sonny, with both feet, and the chief's snowshoes thrown in."

Gregoire, standing silently apart from his young friends, apparently lost in his oft-cultivated habit of "brown study," all at once relinquished his thinking part in the proceedings.

"Look to the east!" he exclaimed, squarely turning to face the named direction.

CHAPTER XXV

ONCE MORE IN THE FOLD

LIKE a pair of eagles, wide-winged and seeking pluming perch on the mountain crest, two aeroplanes were plainly visible above the eastern slope of the acclivity, wheeling here and hovering there, in apparent searching review of the foothills, where they merged with the rugged lines of the greater altitude.

Gregoire's discovery of the aerial arrivals had the effect of temporarily depriving Billy and Henri of all interest in the rocky real estate on which they were chance possessors of standing room. Their minds' eye was "up in the air," in conjunction with all the looking power provided by the binocles, hastily aimed at the gracefully circling mechanical birds aloft.

As if the flying exhibit to the east was not enough to distract the eager viewers, another diversion of similar nature was hailed by the argus-eyed Roumanian in the direction of the valley southward.

"More wings on the wind," advised the old scout, gripping Billy's near shoulder.

The lad faced about to investigate the cause of the announcement, and with first glimpse of the craft swiftly driving over the last designated section of landscape, instantly contributed a proclamation that made Henri perform a sudden pirouette which nearly resulted in a full-length fall for the mentioned youth.

"It's the 'thunderpumper,' as sure as I'm a foot high!"

Young Trouville, having again established a balance, immediately verified his chum's assertion by snapshot observation through quickly leveled field-glasses.

"The same old barque, Buddy," he declared, "and it's a safe bet that the other fellows hanging onto the big one's trail also belong to the bunch we left behind us."

With Antony's long rifle for a flagstaff and Henri's "full dress" handkerchief attached as a streamer, the game of wig-wag was then put into vigorous play at the foremost angle of the lookout position.

The result was a descent upon the plateau of Pentonville, Leclaire, Martigne, Lascelles, Salisky, and Marovitch. The latter two aviators could hardly contain themselves, so great was their satisfaction at the finding of their courier companions, relative

to whose unexplained absence Demonet had been in a stew of worry.

Now to account for the first sighted aerialists on the east side of the mountain—"single riders," as Billy described them. A sweeping view of the upper reaches extending over the foothills failed to locate the pair above ground in that direction, and the eye-searchers on the plateau were forced to the supposition that the light cruisers had shifted flight to the other side of the peaks rising to the north.

Our boys having informed their brother airmen of the fix in which they had left their warplane, the whole company, save Leclaire, who remained as guardian of the machine flock on the plateau, proceeded downgrade to the resting place of the disabled craft.

Antony, who had been accepted at his full recommend worth, by the four members of the party meeting him for the first time, surmounted the drift as a snowshoe expert, roped the stranded machine, and a strong pull by willing arms on the downside completed the task of putting the crippled aeroplane on solid surface.

While the aviation "doctors" were making a diagnosis of the damage, their deliberations were interrupted by the sudden appearance among the rocks above the drift of a pair who needed no other introduction than show of faces—Moppa and Atlass.

"Doing a bit of scouting ourselves for the lost

ones," laughed the last named airman; "saw the plane stuck in the snow, and were just knocking about to pick up the owners. What's the hitch?"

"A shortage at the business end of the machine," advised Billy. "Don't happen to have a paddle in your pocket, do you, lieutenant?"

"If not in the pocket, perhaps in the locker," replied Atlass, joining the group inspecting the warplane. "Say, Moppa," he called, "look in my machine for that driving fixture."

Enough of daylight remained when the repair work was accomplished for the young scouts to drive their warplane around the mountain and make landing among the other machines on the plateau, which proceeding was duplicated by the Odessa riders in their monoplanes.

Here it was decided that the expedition must return forthwith to camp, through the blackest kind of night, and in the face of a decidedly contrary blast which old Boreas had stirred up for the evening.

Antony had a moment alone with the boys for a last word, and his prophecy was that not again would their life-lines cross. "I see you, my young friends, at a great distance, with limitless waters rolling between, and 'mid scenes beyond my ken. But not to memory lost, nor lack of fair fortune, nor honor, nor achievements that count and crown. Farewell."

A touch of hands, and the Roumanian passed from sight into the shadowy background.

"A bit of true metal, that man," was Billy's valedictory to the experience which had given him the measure of Antony Gregoire.

Hundreds of campfires marked gleaming guidelines for the aviators as they neared the Russian bivouac on the frozen plain, and presently, close by the flame-light, Our Young Aeroplane Scouts saw again the lips of Demonet wreathing that smile of welcome which never failed nor faded.

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